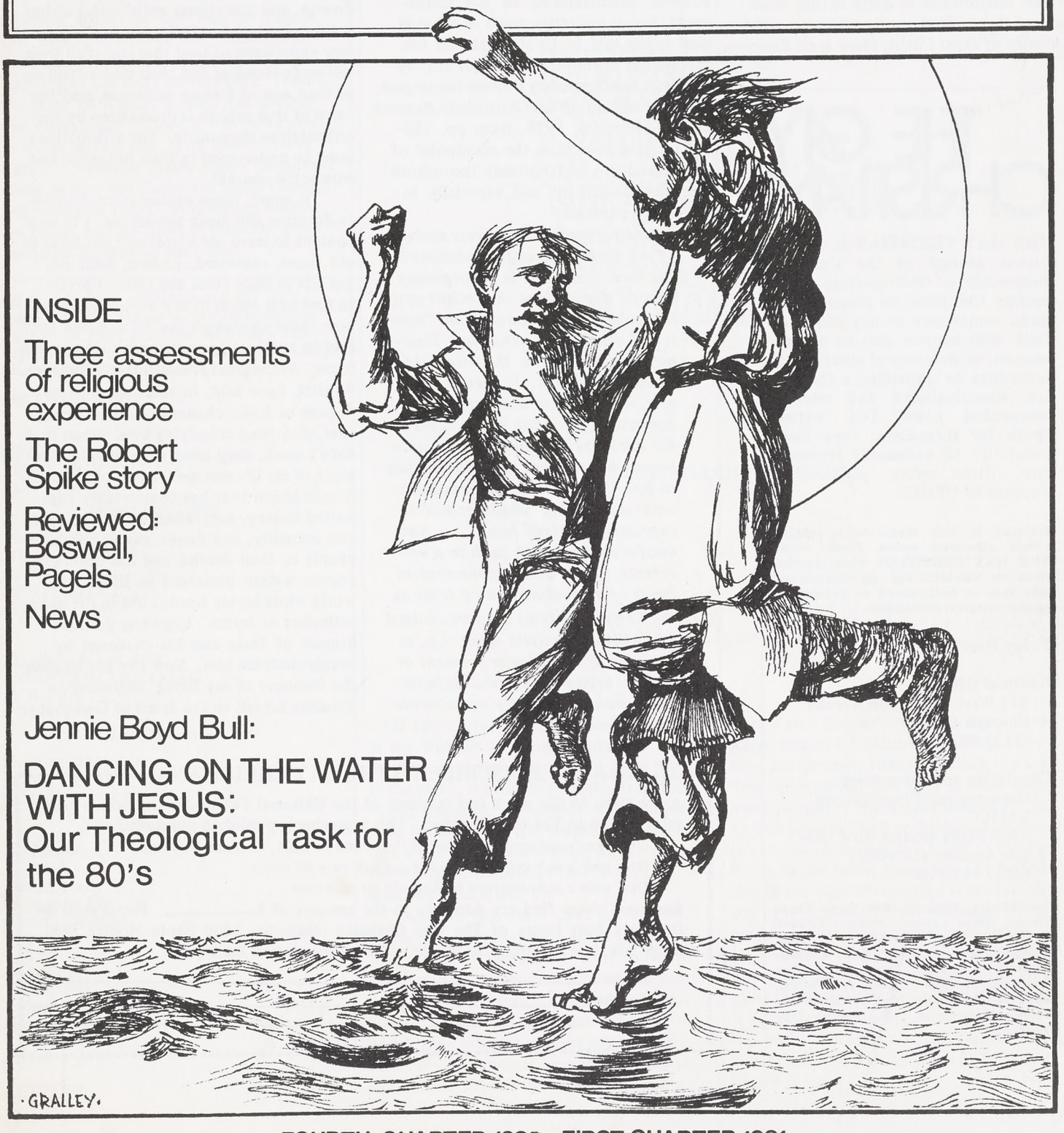
THE GAY CHRISTIAN

A journal of theological reflection from Metropolitan Community Church



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FOURTH QUARTER 1980 – FIRST QUARTER 1981

A letter from the editor

IN THIS ISSUE'S Letters section, there's more on the current christological discussion in UFMCC—as well as some feedback on our last issue. I think a summary statement of the central concern I find in the letters that express dissatisfaction with some of the views we've published about Jesus' relationship to deity is this, from one of them: *Without the unique . . . full divinity of Jesus Christ, there is no Savior and no salvation.* Let me continue the conversation.

Within the Christian faith-tradition, surely, are many who would argue thus; who would hold out for the statement that Jesus is God, and that's that. In recent issues, readers have been asked to consider another understanding of the Christ-event, and it underlies much of what is now being said in UFMCC and in the theological world. I'd like to get at it by quoting a contemporary Process-theologian, Russell Pregeant, in his *Christology Beyond Dogma* (Fortress, 1978, from pp. 158-168). He argues from the standpoint of a universalistic undercurrent throughout the New Testament and especially in Matthew's parables:

> *What emerges from a process analysis of the christological formulations of the New Testament is a christology beyond dogma—one that might aptly be termed "paradigmatic" or "catalytic" christology. The New Testament focuses upon the image of Jesus as the Christ. It does so, however, not really in order to elicit a doctrinal affirmation about Jesus as the exclusive irruption of grace into human history, but rather ultimately to lure its readers into an encounter with that reality which comes to expression through him . . . And insofar as the call to faith in a universally active God is conceived in terms of a proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, this Jesus is acknowledged as a kind of catalytic agent—i.e., as one who at a particular moment in history brings to full and definite expression a possibility of existence before God always given in the human experience . . . . A process analysis . . . exposes, all the more clearly, the objective of the [New Testament] witness: the* experience *of grace, the* act *of trust, the* deed *of mercy.*

That God was in Christ reconciling the world does not require the literal appropriation of every affirmation made about Jesus in the biblical literature or in history. What lies beyond these specific, diverse, and sometimes antithetical claims is this: Jesus *did* in fact open to them a new experience of God that reshaped their self-understanding and their understanding of God and of human existence, and the force of that rebirth is dramatized by the affirmations they made. The affirmations must be understood in their historical and existential context.

To some, those exclamations-turned-to-doctrine still mean something. I'm now content to leave old words and old ideas to old times, respected, known, built on, but left in their place and time. I prefer to find new words of my own to express how Jesus challenges me, to describe the rebirth and healing and wonder Jesus opens to me. As the great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, in their attempt to dispose of Jesus' challenge to their living, first, they tried crucifying him. When that didn't work, they tried worshipping him. Much of my life was spent a part of a churchly institution that has comfortably supported slavery, suppressed women and life and sexuality, and driven gay and lesbian people to their deaths, and has otherwise proven widely irrelevant to life in this world while crying Lord, Lord in the most orthodox of terms. I can't any longer dispose of Jesus and his challenge by simply deifying him. Now I've got to push the frontiers of my living, beginning to abandon myself to the Spirit of God that

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THE GAY CHRISTIAN is a theological journal of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. Its purpose is to build community among people of faith who happen also to be gay, women, or members of other sexual minorities by providing a theological soundingboard and relevant ecumenical news. **TGC** writers speak for themselves; their viewpoints do no necessarily represent any official policy, position, or doctrine of UFMCC.

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F. Jay Deacon, Editor

Editorial Offices:
615 West Wellington Avenue
Chicago 60657
(312) 472-8708

Circulation and Advertising:
Department of Publications, UFMCC
5300 Santa Monica Blvd./304
Los Angeles, CA 90029
(213) 464-5100

Contributing Editors: New York: *Karen Ziegler, Steve Carson.* **Boston:** *Edward T. Hougen.* **Washington:** *Larry J. Uhrig.* **Detroit:** *Jean Gralley.* **Los Angeles:** *Kenneth T. Martin, Donna Wade.* **San Francisco:** *Michael England, Jeff Pulling.* **Long Beach:** *Dusty Pruitt.* **Milwaukee:** *Valerie Bouchard.* **St. Louis:** *Roy Birchard.*

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moved him in its own freedom and power. That, I think, is what our last issue's writers are driving at. History proves, does it not, that worshipping Jesus isn't the point and can be diversionary from the radical grace, challenge, and possibility of the Gospel.

***

This issue, more reflections on that grace, challenge, and possibility. Jennie Boyd Bull, Roy Birchard, and I have different stories to tell—and for Jennie and Roy, response to the challenge of Jesus involves a more traditional understanding of the story about Jesus. There's the story of Robert Spike's discipleship and martyrdom. I hope it will move you as it has moved me. And there's Steve Carson's review of Elaine Pagels' important study of how the Christians called Gnostic responded to Jesus. Stimulating reading, we think, and we hope it provides some useful roadmarks on *your* way.

With this issue, JENNIE BOYD BULL joins the TGC team as a Contributing Editor. A 1981 graduate of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, she is a minister on staff at MCCDC.

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UFMCC: Our theological task for the 80s

OR, ONE CHRISTIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

JENNIE BOYD BULL

I AM ON a "New Year's retreat" by myself in the Western Maryland mountains, and for these past three days I have been hiking in the snow, making fires in the Franklin stove, watching red-crested woodpeckers peck for insects in tree trunks and getting into some meditative reading neglected in the flurry of academics that is called a seminary education.

And on this third day, late in the afternoon, I finally settle down to one of my reasons for being here—to set down in words the bubblings of my mind and heart over this Fellowship I love and live with and am committed to serving in for the rest of my life. Who are we and where are we headed? Two recent events have helped me to focus on this question: One is the Rev. Karen Ziegler's recent article "Jesus According to a Lesbian," (*The Gay Christian*, 3rd quarter, 1980), in which she says "our spiritual survival may depend upon our rejection of traditional theology." (p. 8) The other is The Rev. Richard Weatherly's recent statement in a letter to the Task Force on Inclusive Language: "I believe one of our central strengths is the fact that our only 'scandal' is our openness to all people, especially gay women and men. If we are labelled simply another non-orthodox "new revelation," we are easily (and quite properly) dismissed. Our orthodoxy is a primary tool in our work. I fear we will lose it if we are not very careful. One is either 'In the Mainstream of Christianity' or one is not."

I believe both of these statements are partial truths.* Both err in identifying contemporary U.S. forms of Christianity as synonymous with "the mainstream of Christianity." A broader historical, social and doctrinal perspective is needed. This is a rather sweeping generalization, perhaps only the kind a new minister still in seminary would dare to make, but let me be more specific.

In my view, MCC is currently primarily a sectarian church group, formed in reaction to the dominant culture and, as was the early Church until the time of Constantine, reacting against that culture in a prophetic role that is also critical of the dominant religious institutions. I firmly believe that one of the reasons God has raised up MCC is to be a prophetic witness to bring healing about sexuality within all of Christianity, by our very existence raising up the reality of the separation, avoidance and denial of sexuality that has characterized much of the Christian tradition.

The social role of MCC in the gay community is not unlike that of the black church in the years immediately following Emancipation, when it served as the social focus for community, social-definition, dignity, definition of moral values, prophetic witness both in the Church and in the political sphere, and as healer, educator, advocate and social center for the broken, fearful and estranged lives of the people it served. As by far the oldest, largest and most stable institution within the gay community worldwide, MCC must provide the community needs and stability sought by its members, as well as fulfill its prophetic role of witness. And that witness is most often not a matter of specific political action (although this is certainly also called on regularly), but is rather our very existence.

A particularly instructive comparison between the black community and the gay community is the manner of inculcation of self-hatred by the dominant society. Slaves were brainwashed into accepting their inhumanity through separation from their past culture and in particular through destroying much of the family structure. Thus, many black people were deprived of basic social and economic institutions as well as a source of identity and strength. In this same sense, society has systematically denied to gays the right to any form of legal relationship and through economic and social discrimination does not recognize the existence of same-sex couple relationships. The result is similar to that of slavery: loss of social cohesion and self-identity.

The question of visibility is also similar: There are similarities in the "shuffling" required of blacks and the "closeted" behavior of gays—in neither case is the person being authentic. In both cases the acceptable behavior is defined by white, heterosexual culture, and in both cases the basis for that oppressed behavior is survival. This question of authentic behavior was at the root of the original need for a separate black church and of the need for MCC today. In particular, the origins of MCC congregations and ministry—both from those within the invisible, underground community and from those within other denominations who have left or been forced out—is quite similar to the origins of the black church as both underground church and those who left white churches.

There are also strong parallels in the treatment of women in our culture. The nuclear family as it exists in contemporary industrial society separates women from each other, makes them economically dependent on men, and defines them in relation to men. Women are either wife of, mother of, secretary of, etc. That is one reason lesbians are so threatening—we are independent of any intimate relations controlled by men. The economic aspect is reflected in the disparity of income between the lesbian and gay male communities. Women's assuming their husband's name in marriage and other questions of invisibility in language also promote this loss of identity and self-image. The inauthentic behavior expected of women, such as helplessness, is similar to closeted behavior of gays and shuffling of blacks. These adaptations have been necessary for survival in situations of powerlessness, but they eat at the root of our authenticity and integrity. The Christian gospel must be about empowerment to fuller personhood in community, and that is what inclusivity is all about.

And yet MCC's social role is also that of creating community, a stable institution for spiritual leadership within the gay community that has many similarities to the role of the black church in the black community. As MCC grows as an institution, we must be careful that in our attempts to build community, to minister to needs, we do not become so like the institutional churches of the dominant culture that we cease to fulfill our prophetic role as "creative minority." The key to retaining this uniqueness is authenticity, being true to our personal experiences of brokenness and of wholeness, and speaking from that truth, not from the definitions of others. How does the Word dwell among *us*, the gay community? What is its grace and truth in our particular lives (John 1:14)?

This general statement about MCC as a Church contradicts the concept that the Church must either accept the status quo or "blow it apart." Instead, I understand that the Church must always partake of both prophetic and nurturing functions, both using the structures and institutions of the dominant culture and critiquing them and witnessing to their deceit when called by God to do so. To toally reject all culture as oppressive is to take an extreme dualist stance that is alien to God's creation. The Church must always live in the world as sign of the new realm of God in Christ; its life is that of sacrament, the Body of Christ broken for the life of the world. The Church must seek to follow wherever God is acting in the world, there to speak prophetic truth, to respond in service in that place, and to praise the Good News of God's redemptive love in Christ Jesus.

Where does all of this generalization leave me personally? Well, let me tell you a story. About six years ago I was on a spiritual retreat with other MCCers. The leader told us to close our eyes and imagine ourselves in a boat with the disciples (Matt. 14:22-33). Jesus comes walking toward me on the water, and asks me to come to him. I shrank down into the bottom of the boat, curled up into a ball and muttered, "No man is going to tell me what to do." In reaction to that experience, I cried hysterically in the pain of understanding my lack of faith and the block that Jesus' maleness was to that faith. Recognition of that pain was the first step toward healing. I was under conviction.

A couple of years—and many struggles—later, I realized that it was not Jesus' maleness at all that was the stumbling block; rather it was my own self-hatred as a woman, my refusal to believe God loved and accepted me as a woman. Again, I experienced an intense time of repentance and conversion, as I accepted the wonder of God's love for me as the woman I am. In the process, I came to know and love God's dwelling with me in female images. Later that year, I again envisioned Jesus calling to me across the water. This time, I said "yes,"—and we danced (English

country folk dancing, to be exact). In a moment of liberation, wholeness, salvation, I accepted Jesus as friend—a dance partner whose sex was irrelevant—and as Lord—the one with authority. After all, only God can walk on water and uplift me to do the same. Jesus is truly Lord of the dance! Accepting the Lordship of Jesus Christ thus included for me a joy of self-acceptance, of loving myself as a woman, and as a lesbian.

I had long identified myself as a feminist, a woman-identified-woman, a lesbian, yet it was only in saying "yes" that I found my fullest self as God-identified. And as a God-identified woman I grow in grace as a human being who is before all else a member of Christ (dancing partner, if you will), and because a member of Christ, claiming my inheritance as child of God, created in God's image to walk/dance in the new life of the Holy Spirit.

By the way, in all of this the question of inclusive language was a "battling ground," but ultimately not the decisive issue. Language helps to create negative and positive self-images and frees or restricts our God images, and I support the Fellowship's continued growth in use of inclusive language. But I believe human loving, relating, modelling, etc., is ultimately more crucial to our identity and spiritual growth. In other words, I see experience as preceding both language and doctrine, as has been true in the very founding and growth of this Fellowship, although it is always true that our experience is shaped by our language and beliefs.

And yet the element of personal experience as a way of knowing God's truth for me must always be informed by scripture and tradition. It is particularly tempting in the gay community for us to focus exclusively on present experience because of lack of historical roots, separation from traditional family structures, few children, etc. But the promise of the Christian Gospel is deeply rooted in *history*, a history of past promises and future visions. Our statement of faith is that "Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will* come again." Thus, it is necessary to place this personal faith journey and struggle toward growth that we all share in a historical and doctrinal context.

Karen Ziegler opens her article with four observations, on which she bases the rest of her thoughts. I find these helpful in focusing my own thoughts, and will use them as a framework for what follows.

1. *There is no more difficult theological issue for lesbians than Christology. There is also no more threatening issue for those who are already threatened by women in the church.*

I agree, but another way of saying this same thing is to confess that Christology is central to all Christian doctrine and to each person's faith stance. It is rightfully the central place for theological struggle.

2. *We need to start at the opposite place [from Christianity] with what it means to be a lesbian. We are primarily accountable to the lesbian community, to our sisters,* not *to the church.*

This is where I disagree most strongly with Karen. I am primarily accountable to God, and then to my neighbor. The statement seems to equate the Church totally with the fallible and often oppressive institution that is New Right evangelical Christianity in the U.S. today, and the result is an absence of any doctrine of the Church as more than the institution. How is God related to the Church? Christian churches, including MCC, seriously need to explore ecclesiology.

Another tendency in this statement and in evangelical Christianity is a focus on the individual. Both of these tendencies make any exclusive focus on the incarnation of Christ skewed because not adequately related to other aspects of Christian doctrine, especially to a doctrine of God's atoning work in Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is *the* primary Christian doctrine, and without it any doctrine of incarnation is hopeless, and any doctrines of the Holy Spirit or of the Church are nonexistent in any power.

Actually, by starting first with her lesbian experience in dealing with the incarnation, Karen and many other Christians today are in reality dealing with *anthropology*, not Christology. Ever since Schleiermacher, with his individualistic understanding of the atonement as at-oneness with God, the doctrine of the incarnation has taken precedence in much liberal Christian theology. This reflects the scientific Enlightenment's emphasis on seeking to understand human nature through sociology, biology, psychology, etc. Many people today no longer hold to a single conception of what it means to be human. Rather than a single ontology of human nature, we speak of opposing, dualist ontologies of male and female, black and white, capitalist European and third world socialist, gay and straight, lesbians and gay men, etc. All of these dualisms are of themselves limiting of self-definition. While they may speak sociological and cultural truths, in defining myself first as a lesbian I am limiting my understanding of myself as a full human being. It is God who first defines me, before any earthly reality.

> *I cannot call Jesus my "Master" or my "Lord" because the very point of my being as a lesbian is that no man is my master and no man is my lord.*

In response to Karen's statement, I confess: "Yes, no *man* is my lord, but God is, and only God and ultimately God." The acceptance of the Lordship of God in Christ Jesus freed me—and you—from all earthly authorities, all male domination. As human being Jesus is my friend and dance partner, and as divine being Jesus is my lord, the one with authority, who empowers me to walk in the new life of the Spirit (Rom. 6:4). And they are one in the Lord of the Dance; otherwise how can we dance on water in the midst of the pain of this world?

I ask each of us in MCC to ask ourselves: Do we truly believe there are fundamental differences in human nature? Am I white before I am human? Woman before I am human? Gay before human?

Current psychological and sociological studies seem to underscore the basic Christian message that we are one in Christ Jesus, members of Christ and children of God before we are anything else. This oneness in Christ negates the male/female dualism inherent in much of Christian tradition and theology. The gender identity research of John Money at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore emphasizes that the human embryo is not differentiated sexually until the third or fourth month, and that an infant's gender identity is determined more by the sex of assignment (whether treated as male or female by parental figures) than by genitals. Many of you know lots more about this than I do, but this says to me that who we are as male or female is largely socially and culturally determined and is not biologically central to our being as a person. As Genesis says, we are created in God's image, and only after that are we male and female. (Gen. 1:26). And current scientific research underlines the androgynous as the ideal for humanity and minimizes the differences

between the sexes. A recent review of past research on gender differences states:

> The only well-established differences . . . were that girls have greater verbal ability than boys and that boys excel in visual-spatial and mathematical skills and are more aggressive than girls . . . Any skill improves with practice, and how well a person's genetic potential for a given ability is realized depends on practic. (David Goleman, "Special Abilities of the Sexes," *Psychology Today* (Nov. 1978) pp. 49,55).

We are truly created as humans for relationship with the other, but that "other" cannot be defined by sexual differentiation; the whole of the person must be considered. After summarizing the dehumanizing role stereotypes assigned to each sex, John McNeill reflects:

> An even more serious consequence follows if we assume that these heterosexual identity images constitute the total mature content of the human personality. For this results in the tendency to understand the human individual as essentially partial and incomplete . . . True Christian love, even married love, can only exist between persons who see themselves as somehow total and equal. Christian love must be love out of fullness and not out of need . . . The homosexual community has, perhaps, a special role to play in liberating the heterosexual community to a fuller understanding of themselves as persons by being an organic challenge within society to the partial and dehumanizing aspects of these sexual identity images. (*The Church and the Homosexual*, 142f).

Our anthropology must first begin with *theology*. I am first of all a member of Christ and child of God, which overcomes all separation, and if I don't start there, then I define myself in particular human terms that can only end up separating me from others.

Now the problem comes in when the dominant culture defines God and human nature in ways that exclude many of us. Instead, *all* of God's people need to contribute theologically to a wholistic conception of God that reflects our varied experiences. For too long the basic images of God have been defined by white, male heterosexual (or asexual because celibate) theologians. As a result, black, female, sexual images have been repressed.

Dr. James S. Tinney, in "The Feminist Impulse in Black Pentecostalism," makes this same claim from a Black perspective:

> Black Pentecostalism is, in fact, possibly the best example within modern culture of the feminist principle in religion reasserting itself. Both cultural anthropologists and philosophical theologians have historically noted the dualism of characteristics which have come to be identified as masculine and feminine, but which in actuality express the androgynous or wholistic nature of life itself. Particularly in the Judaeo-Christian stream, a concerted effort has been made to define and describe mainstream religion by these so-called masculine traits. The masculine character of mainstream white Christianity includes emphases such as consciousness or rationality, clarity or logical apologetics, light or whiteness as the purest and highest good, pursuit of God and knowledge of "him," order or formal liturgy with an emphasis on silence and programming, and discrimination or exclusivist tendencies. . . . Pentecostalism (the white American and European branches of the movement have tended, since their separation from the Black origins of the movement, to stray from these feminine characteristics and conform more-and-more to masculine and mainstream Christian forms) has traditionally emphasized the value of unconsciousness, ecstasy, and trance; mysteries "in the Spirit," including unknown tongues; darkness, or the importance of Black and non-white races in the divine scheme, rather than a heart "whiter than snow" and other symbolic elevations of whiteness and light; receptivity or possessions of the human body by God, so that God overcomes worshippers rather than worshippers being "seekers;" chaos, loudness, and noise in drumming, dancing and spontaneous moves of the Spirit rather than formal order; and inclusiveness, tolerance of differences, and tendencies toward universalism rather than discrimination.

This oneness of humanity is essential not only for a full doctrine of the incarnation but also for a full doctrine of the atonement. It is a normative Christian principle that what Christ did not assume was not saved, and as long as we narrowly define ourselves, we exclude ourselves from both incarnation and salvation. It is called the "scandal of particularity:" that God's saving act is in the life, death and resurrection of an Aramaic-speaking, Jewish carpenter's son. Only if we believe the resurrection can we then believe that God's act in that one person is universally true for *all* persons, no matter what our condition. The Apostle's Creed includes "he descended into hell." The farthest reaches of Gehenna, of our own alienation and loneliness as "sexual outcasts" are available to God's saving love—and it can be no less true for lesbians. The problem is *not* the maleness of Jesus, but rather accepting our full humanity and allowing God to reveal the fullness of God's divinity in all of our life and in all of our particular flesh.

3. We are struggling very hard for our lives. Lesbians simply do not 'belong' in a patriarchal culture.

4. We have no history of the survival of our fore-sisters.

These two presuppositions speak of an alienation and isolation that can only come from a present cultural identification. Most of the people of this world must struggle for their lives, and even poor white male U.S. citizens do not *belong* in the dominant culture of multinational corporate capitalism that rules the world's economy and threatens global destruction. In a game of divide-and-conquer, each group is given limited privileges to separate them from others.

And as for *history*, again, most of the peoples of this world have no written history: Not only all women, but most Blacks, all poor peoples, etc. Where *are* our roots? I agree that all minorities must seek to know their histories, but as people who are God-defined, as Christians, we must first turn to God's history in the Old and New Testaments to understand our past. Yes, the scriptures are patriarchal, but that is not all they are. They are the written record of the history of a small, oppressed tribe and God's saving, claiming action among them. Can God do any less with us?

Another area to be explored is the history of doctrine itself. Some would say that the current Christological debates are new—unheard of in the history of Christianity. I say they are one more version of the tensions of Christology since the earliest centuries. Incarnation and atonement are central mysteries of the Christian faith, and as such can never be adequately defined by reason. The Council of Chalcedon defined normative Christology in static Greek terms of two persons in one

nature, resolving the Docetic and Ebionite heresies. Until today, Christians have tended to err either on the Docetic side of emphasizing the divinity of Christ to an exclusion of his full humanity, or on the Ebionite side, emphasizing Jesus' humanity but denying full divinity.

In contemporary Christianity, I see a tendency toward docetism in mainstream evangelical Christology. The pale, "pretty," Jesus on Sunday School walls is devoid of sexuality or human emotion. Jesus is personalized and individualized "in my heart," thus downplaying the prophetic, social aspect of the Jesus who proclaimed: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17) and who brings redemption for all creation through the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus is Lord, not only of my heart, but of all of history, and I can either accept or deny that reality (Eph. 1:15-23). I am especially amazed at those who further emphasize this docetic Christ by neglecting the Old Testament.

In particular, this docetism has resulted in the suppression of sexuality by the Church, in a false dualism of spirit and body. MCC has consistently critiqued and witnessed to the truth of the full incarnation of Jesus Christ in full embodiment, including sexuality, and this is as it should be. However, in reaction to this dominant docetism of the culture, the Ebionite view has over-reacted, in a typical excess of the suppressed view. Those who emphasize the full humanity of Christ and criticize excessive emphasis on maleness to the exclusion of a fuller understanding of Jesus as a human being in his cultural setting do us a favor, and we need to heed that perspective and grow in accepting "light from dark corners" of neglected understandings. However, it is still an error to so emphasize the humanity of Jesus that his divinity is denied. One error does not excuse its opposite. The goal is a fuller understanding of both the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, in the humility that such a mystery is beyond all human understanding, and that knowing Christ Jesus is an act of faith before it is a doctrinal proposition.

But all of this talk of incarnation becomes skewed and out of proportion unless it is accompanied by talk of the atonement, of the power of the resurrection. Here again, "mainstream" evangelical Christianity in the U.S. emphasizes the substitutionary or vicarious doctrine of the atonement, using biblical images of God as judge with Jesus Christ bearing the verdict for human sin, as intercessor before the throne of God. This view of the atonement is clearly part of the biblical and traditional Christian theology, and its focus is on the crucifixion. But it is not the only scriptural basis for atonement, and I ask that my brothers and sisters who hold this understanding open themselves to the other biblical images that have been claimed by the Christian Church throughout the centuries.

Christ is also the high priest and the sacrifice, the *lamb* slain and victorious. This Christus Victor, or classical atonement theory, sees Christ as victorious over sin and death. All imagery at the heart of the mystery of Christianity is radically incongruous—the lamb conquers. The images of victory in battle are used to describe the uplifting of the powerless and weak; the victim as Lord, as one with authority. The locus of this doctrine is the resurrection. There is no image of greater hope for the oppressed community and for me personally than that of the cross as victory, of weakness as strength, of death as life. This understanding of atonement also emphasizes the communal, cosmic context of salvation (Phil. 2:5-11). The victory is won, and is ours for the claiming: "It is finished," as the Gaithers sing. As a confirmed pacifist, I especially appreciate this image, because it takes war as the ultimate in human violence and redeems it, turns it upside down, proclaims the lamb as victor.

There is a third atonement theory; the moral renewal theory of Abelard, with a subjective, more individual focus, seeing God's act in Christ as freeing humans from fear of death. I see Karen Ziegler as coming from this understanding, in which humans are empowered to be Christlike through the example of Christ's life and passion. The locus here is on the incarnation. This doctrine is clearly within the mainstream of Christian tradition. Its strength is that it speaks directly to human subjective experience and emotions of fear of death, alienation, meaninglessness. This personal identification must always be included in any understanding of God's work in Christ, and is certainly founded in scripture, but the danger is that by itself it puts human experience before God's action.

If the Christian Church has had room for all three of these doctrines of the atonement, in all their variations and combinations, so surely must UFMCC. For to move in "the mainstream of Christianity" does *not* mean accepting the status quo of the Christian Church as it exists today in the U.S. or elsewhere, but to reach into the fullness of Christian history and tradition, and the fullness of Christian experience worldwide among all people, and the fullness of the varied scriptural images and themes available to us.

I suggest that, in seeking unity on a broad basis, we look to current ecumenical statements, such as those published by the World Council of Churches. "One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognized Ministry" is one such, or the recent "In Quest of a Church Uniting: An Emerging Theological Consensus, Ministry" published in 1980 by the Consultation on Church Union. I suggest also that we study the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds and current commentaries on them, such as those by Karl Barth, Thielicke and Pannenberg, to understand the history of their interpretation and their origins. It is not enough simply to accept traditional doctrines unquestioningly. God gave us minds to struggle and seek, and current situations to give rise to new questions. It is my faith that the earliest credal confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord," a trinitarian understanding of God, and the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are as true for us today as they were when first used, and that we can grow as a Church in studying them and seeking their truth in the reality of our own lives. But that truth must include the full naming of our present reality, being true to our present experience and being open to the universal naming of God's truth in our experience.

Finally, I would suggest several areas of study that would help us greatly to grow toward a theology that speaks from our experience as UFMCC:

1. Continued exploration of a theology of *sexuality*, both through doctrines of incarnation and of atonement. Sexuality and the fear of death?
2. We need to be clear about our understanding of the *resurrection*. The current doctrinal statement does not mention the resurrection until the section on holy communion; a clearer statement is needed much earlier, such as in the Christological statement of III.A.3.

In regard to a theology of sexuality, I am especially interested in input from our pastoral experience in counseling or in claiming our own sexuality. I find it helps people coming out to pray when they masturbate; it is especially helpful for

lesbians to image God as female in their prayer life. How does this experience relate theologically? For one thing, it makes GOD the divine lover, not Jesus.

3. *Ecclesiology*. The doctrine of the church is nonexistent in our faith statement and many people see this as one of the greatest weaknesses of evangelical Christianity. Protestantism in the U.S. is based in a voluntaristic denominationalism that either participates in a civil religion such as the Christian Right espouses or in an individualized concept of salvation that leads to privatized religion separate from any secular involvement. It results in attitudes and lives that say, "As long as I'm saved, the world can go to hell," or "my particular doctrinal stance is the only true way to salvation and all others are lost sinners." Jesus Christ's very life shows that God often works *outside* established religious structures, so Christians can never claim to have the sole grasp on truth; rather we must seek to walk in the world, following Christ's lordship, in service as the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Spirit. There are many biblical images to draw from and each creates its own emphases, with corresponding strengths and weaknesses. We have much work to do in developing an ecclesiology from our own experience. I personally see the Church as Sacrament, the Body of Christ, broken for the life of the world.

4. *Pneumatology*. Again, our doctrinal statement speaks little of the Holy Spirit, and yet the Spirit creates and builds our Church itself. Exploration of the Holy Spirit is especially important for UFMCC because of our prophetic task and because the Spirit is fruitful ground for dealing with the neglected qualities of Christianity, wualities traditionally associated with women's experience, such as emotion, ecstasy, mystery, the irrational. Again,the Holy Spirit is clearly present wherever barriers are overcome, and I personally attest to the power of the Spirit in UFMCC and in the worshipping life of our community. And yet we fear the Spirit because we cannot have control, and often MCC quenches the Spirit, especially when we let issues of doctrine and polity divide us, for ablve all the Spirit upbuilds us in love and works to knit us together as one body. Without specifying specific doctrines of various charismatic gifts of the Spirit, can we not arrive at some basic understanding of its unity for us?

I see the above proposed work resulting in a revised doctrinal statement, *not* coming out of the standard bylaws revision process (or out of the proposed Inclusive Language Task Force revisions), but rather out of a grass roots study such as that which developed the "Six Questions," which continue to shine as a beginning light in our self-understanding of our theological task. It is time for the Faith, Fellowship and Order Commission to once again take up its task, and enable discussion of these concerns in a constructive way, with the goal to arrive at broad-based unity with room for varying beliefs within that unity. I personally am comfortable with a wide range of theological opinion in UFMCC, and I believe our current statement of faith has served us well in our beginning years, but now is a time for greater clarity (not necessarily greater detail), including integration of "light from dark corners" of neglected aspects of Christian experience and tradition. The "mainstream of Christianity" includes the fullness of human sexuality, race, gender, emotion, nationality. We have more in common in our "otherness" than we are willing to claim much of the time. And it is this separation that is overcome in Christ Jesus.

> *"I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the /children/ of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of /God/ who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and now not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as /children/, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what /they/ see? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."* (Rom. 8:18-25).

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It is now 8:15 p.m. I have written steadily since 2:30 -- 21 pages of scribbled words, and three pens out of ink. A supper gulped down, a terrific backache and neckache. It is dark outside now, and time for me to light the fire in the wood stove and curl up with music and a "simple" book.

What was all this for anyway—a pouring out of my guts for this Fellowship to see? Some will call me heretical because not properly evangelical; some will call me male-dominated, identified and token; some will simply call me confused, ignorant and presumptuous. That is the risk you take, I take, we all take. I ask each of you—it is only in taking the risk of pouring out our faith in our lives, and in our words, that this Fellowship will grow in faith. Will you take the same risk, and can we disagree in love? I give thanks for January 1, 1981; a day spent in retreat, in pain, in victory. Would the red-crested woodpeckers understand their human friend, pecking away at words on paper as they peck away at tree trunks? Both of us peck to be fed, to survive. In faith, I claim that those who seek are fed. And that pecking is part of the Dance.

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foundly affected by Jesus of Nazareth; but we may just choose new words out of our own experience to describe what has happened in our lives, and what continues to happen. I am tempted toward real hostility toward those who say that they have defined "Christian" and that I am not one; and that we should withdraw from this church. I have to struggle, then, with what I have been taught by Jesus: that Love is the greatest power in the universe; that it is the nature of God. It is that Love, we believe, that energizes both this effort and UFMCC. I am constrained to set straight the record -- and to struggle still to love. Sometimes it ain't easy, and we value your spiritual support in facing the challenge. We pray that for readers who struggle with the variety of views in this issue of TGC, we haven't made that loving difficult, because it is the principal mark of the one who would follow Jesus.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, 'I'M NOT BEING SPIRITUALLY FED'?"

ROY BIRCHARD

"I'M NOT BEING spiritually fed." "I just don't get anything out of going to church anymore." "The pastor doesn't 'do anything' for me. I like him/her fine as a friend, but there's no spiritual food there." -- These criticisms, and others like them, tempt ministers to react defensively. It's the ultimate put-down of someone's spiritual leadership. If somebody says, "I'm not being spiritually fed," there is no way you can spiritually force-feed them. That much we should have learned from Christian history. After all, no one but the individual speaking can immediately report on what is spiritual Granola. If it *tastes* like Pablum, maybe it is. Pastors and ministers can talk about educational and religious *programs* ad infinitum, but as we know from the business and political realms, many programs trumpeted with the most well-equipped of public relations apparatuses may yet fail to clothe a bankrupt regime. The comment of a young Soviet citizen to *The New York Times* that Marxist-Leninist ideology is "dry bread" is as dangerous to that government as any of the hazards of international power politics or defense strategy.

So it is with Christian churches. The advantage that Christian churches have over the Marxists is that as joint heirs with the resurrected Christ we are subject to unpredictable spiritual renewals.

This is not to say that everyone who says, "I'm not being spiritually fed" is speaking the truth of prophetic criticism. It *is* the ultimate put-down of a minister or teacher. "If in a foul mood, the pastor snapped at me and hurt my feelings . . . "If I was an intimate friend of the previous pastor but this one treats me just like another member of the congregation . . . "If this pastor's background is different from mine and what s/he thinks is important I think is silly . . . "If I found the previous minister to be an understanding personal counsellor, but this one doesn't seem to pay attention when I'm trying to talk out my problem . . . I can say, 'I'm not being spiritually fed,' i.e., 'This minister is a turkey and I wish s/he would fly away!" It is not very far from the beginning of such mutterings to the point where a church body becomes divided between those who feel themselves "spiritually fed" and those who don't, with destructive bitterness and church conflict resulting.

Some of this criticism, as I indicated, has *private* meaning which can be brought out and resolved through congregational group discussion. After all, most private therapists and counsellors will caution a potential counselee to take two or three initial sessions to see if personal chemistry will be favorable to their productively working together. If I am a woman whose new therapist physically resembles the uncle who raped me at age eleven, it may be impossible for us to deal with traumatic childhood material, and there is no *fault* or judgment to be made about my would-be counsellor's ability. But the problem is still serious and real. In the academic world, we all had favorite professors and *un*favorite ones, and professors have pet students and others from whom they seem curiously distant.

Sometimes, lack of "spiritual food" results from such irrational, but real, factors or from the sometimes-illegitimate personal agendas referred to above, and in an atmosphere of love and trust, congregational discussion may yield a group compromise that is at least tolerable for a majority. In America, church members for whom it is *in*tolerable frequently move on to other churches and find spiritual leaders more personally congenial to them. But not all such criticism is irrational and illegitimate, and I would like to address the ways in which a word of prophecy may be spoken to us through the complaint about "spiritual food," for to ignore a prophecy can be fatal! First, I want to indicate some areas of religious vulnerability peculiar to UFMCC, and secondly, I want to point out a couple of models for addressing the problem.

One vulnerability is that in UFMCC there is frequently only one congregation in any given metropolitan area. Unlike Baptists or Catholics in the United States who may have many congregations to choose from, for many MCCers it's *this* particular congregation or none at all -- perhaps it's even *this* particular congregation or *no* Christian involvement at all. That situation creates its own set of highly explosive potential conflicts, so that church members may come to feel themselves spiritual rats in a hostile sea clinging to a single, sinking lifeboat.

Hopefully, with the passage of time and the multiplication of congregations, this situation will be somewhat alleviated, as it already has been in a metropolitan area like Los Angeles. When we have people coming from so many different Christian backgrounds, there need to be varieties of options, so that no single congregation needs to be both "high" and "low," "evangelical" and "liberal" – to say nothing of big and small. I have heard small MCC congregations referred to as "personality cults" focusing on their pastor and big ones called "circuses." But in truth, I, a church-goer, may like a huge congregation because I delight in crowds and don't want to get personally involved in congregational responsibilities. Then, again, I may want to exercise leadership and be involved, and a small MCC group may allow me opportunities a large, more organizationally-rigid one could not. As a church member, I may find myself growing spiritually through great preaching and mass evangelism, or I may achieve such growth through my own experiences in the push and tug of small groups. Every Christian's spiritual pilgrimage is unique to that individual who senses intuitively what constitutes "growth" and what represents

Roy Birchard is a graduate student in counseling at Christ Seminary-Seminex, St. Louis. He founded this journal while pastoring The Metropolitan Community Church of New York and now serves as a Contributing Editor.

only stagnation.

Another vulnerability is that young organizations grow fast and change their contours like plants shooting up overnight. And –for UFMCC -- what worked in 1968 or 1973 isn't necessarily going to "work" now. To be sure, a lot of it does: Our churches hold regular Sunday worship services. We offer communion, generally by intincture with private prayer as at an altar call. We preach that God loves and accepts lesbians and gay men like all other human beings. We interpret the Scriptures for those troubled by non-salvific interpretations. We work in common with other lesbian and gay organizations for the advancement of our community, toward the end of legal repression and the gaining of visible respect and acceptance by the wider community. Our ministers and lay leaders are often highly visible on local media, may write and publish and argue theology with other local church leaders. We bury and baptize and unite in holy union. We provide church buildings for other worthy groups to meet in, we support crisis intervention hotlines, we hold church suppers and dances and coffee houses to provide social alternatives to the bars. We do all these things and more. *Surely, isn't that enough?*

No, nor should it be. Like the making of books, of the making of church programs there is no end, and many meetings are a weariness of the flesh. But all of this does not *necessarily* add up to spiritual growth, and an honest church member may labor long in all these areas and still come up feeling bored, unchallenged, unfulfilled – even in the midst of other excited people for whom all these church works are a great personal revelation. I remember one genuine Christian searcher who came through a congregation I pastored and wandered away, having honestly tried. Before leaving, he said, "Gay, gay, gay! That's all I ever hear around here. I accept myself. I believe God loves me. I need more than that!"

Another may say, "I'm not being spiritually fed -- not by meetings and discussion groups and sermons that tell me God loves me just as I am. Maybe I don't *want* to be just as I am. Maybe there are some parts of my life, even accepted and gay as I am, where I see the reign of sin, where I feel myself making the same mistakes over and over, areas of my life where I feel out of touch with God – places, frankly, that *need* spiritual growth. Where will I find it?"

The paradox for the minister is that some of the most committed and faithful church members may be the ones caught in this quandry of spiritual stagnation. How can there be growth?

First, we must admit the problem is real. Not all who complain are invariably soreheads and troublemakers. Sometimes they are, of course. For some, the complaint may be an opportunity to be destructive and hateful and blame someone else for their inability to face the contradictions of their own lives. But not always. Sometimes, the problem is real. Once we admit it, we can try to deal with it.

At the risk of speaking too personally, I want to testify as to some of what I, Roy Birchard, have seen these past ten years in this ministry and what it portends for further spiritual growth. I am a great believer in the spiral view of history: thesis and antithesis and synthesis – with each new synthesis an advance over the one before. Ten years ago I came out of a liberal Protestant background, the United Church of Christ, and began to work in ministry in the gay community in New York – a city which then had quite a few people of Protestant background, often white Southerners, who had run away from harsh, fundamentalist cultures to be gay in New York City. If New York was Sodom and Gomorrah on the Hudson in the eyes of their families and communities, well, that was just where they wanted to be. I remember one New York church member, a white poet from Mississippi who told me once after he had been with us a while, "If I had walked in that door and had heard you speak in a Southern accent, I never would have come back again" (I am a native of Vermont).

My identity and church background gave me certain advantages which I tried to put to good use in the early days of MCC in the Northeast United States. In many ways, my church background and training already gave me the tools of Scriptural interpretation that allowed me to believe that salvation was something I had access to. My own denomination even had a social justice department that had gone on record, even then, in defense of my rights and those of people like me; church officials were very free in giving me encouragement to minister to gay people, if not so free with money. I had a good education from a prestigious seminary and was then employed as an editor/writer for another mainline Protestant denomination where I was openly gay and accepted. No church ever expelled me, degraded me personally, or told me I was an incurable sinner. It was something that might have happened to people I knew and worked with –but it hadn't happened to me. I was unscarred by the fires that had burned others. Religious positions that were the end-result of painful struggle for others were handed to me. In the short term, that was a great initial advantage to my work, for I had the self-confidence that came from the support and endorsement of these impressive Christian agencies and personalities.

When MCC sent Howard Wells as its missionary to New York and I went to meet him, I already knew what a congregation was, what made it up, and how it might be organized in that city. Beyond the New York church, from my work at Presbyterian headquarters I knew what a denomination looked like, some of the broad outlines of how it might be organized, and what agencies and instrumentalities it needed to do its work. In the last ten years, I have seen UFMCC acquire many of these ministries and Fellowship agencies -- from STI, to a literate and attractive *In Unity*, to the capacity of its institutional ministries department to expand to handle a Cuban refugee crisis referred to us by the U.S. State Department.

But I am talking, you see, about institutional growth of a Christian denomination and its congregations – congregations that do the kinds of things I indicated earlier and denominations acceptable for membership in the National Council of Churches. Yet a denomination, like a congregation, may have programs and the outer marks of establishment, and yet be spiritually decadent. The very denominations in which I was schooled, in fact, have been withering and dwindling these past ten years, overtaken by newer, more charismatic and evangelical Sunbelt denominations, overtaken for good reasons and bad, numbers and the popularity of "solemn assemblies" being no particular indicator of spiritual health either. But what I learned from the churches I went to school in and sought to convey for the growth of UFMCC *has been conveyed* – by me and others like me.

I was a founding member of MCC New York and its second pastor, the founding editor of this magazine, first elder from the northeast United States and first director of the Washington Office of the Fellowship. First this . . . and first that. Founding pastor of MCC of Tidewater, Virginia, too.

But the bag of tricks is empty now. Bring "first" doesn't interest or challenge

me any more. I find no "spiritual growth" in it. There. I have said it too, you see. There are other things in the Christian life besides founding things – glad and grateful though I am to be able to know that I was involved in the building of God's Church. But it's over, and I too, continue to need spiritual growth. What do I do with the rest of my Christian life?

For me personally, a solution has taken shape whose contours involve a lightened ministerial responsibility, a return to another, different seminary for a time of study and reflection, an admission to myself that certain private personal issues in my life must be dealt with before I can be effective as a minister in this new Fellowship the past decade has created. I feel good about this personal agenda, and encourage others to write their own.

But part of it involves my understanding that the gifts I and others of my MCC "generation" brought UFMCC have become an integral part of its life and that, important as I felt them to be, they are not the be-all, end-all of this church. There are other gifts UFMCC –and I – need. What do I mean?

How else do you explain the wide and deep furrow Rosalind Rinker plowed among us since the last General Conference? The woman got heard! I saw in others and experienced in myself *hunger* for what she was teaching. I bought six of her books and read them all as fast as I could. And what was she teaching? Prayer. A spiritual exercise. Something that high and low Christians do, a spiritual exercise common to evangelical and liberal, done in both traditional and inclusive language – but done! We all pray, and she taught many among us through her itinerations at district conferences and churches even as she has in other denominations. We need more such wandering teachers. You won't get Rosalind Rinker at your local gay Democratic club. With the help of Holy Spirit, we must find and identify gifted *teachers* – not just preachers of which we have an increasingly well-trained supply. Let there be *healers* among us too, and workers of miracles more rare than those already wrought. Let us pray for and identify all the gifts of Holy Spirit needed among us.

If I sometimes feel (as I do) that I have come to a dead end in my ministerial career, the answer is not to retreat back to the United Church of Christ. Now they are a perfectly fine denomination, but since I've been in MCC I've gotten spoiled. I *like* the discipline of the ancient communion/mass every Sunday, and I like it the way we do it. My church background doesn't do that. And I like the overt sharing and testifying about the work of the Holy One among us that I experience in the "evangelical" UFMCC, and my church background doesn't do that the way we do it either. You see, I've been hooked! So going backward, for me, is not the answer. So how can I go forward?

Maybe to sit and listen to others whose time has now come. To Rosalind Rinker. To those for whom the 1982 General Conference theme means something it may not mean to me. To admit that if once upon a time my theological and ecclesiastical background had something important to contribute to UFMCC, that now somebody else's may be feeding importantly in. If the center of the church veers too far in a new direction and there are overemphases and distortions, the theological spiral – thesis and antithesis – will pull it back again in time. In time for me? Why can't I leave that to God? Whose time *is* it anyway? My time or God's? Spiritual growth may come from listening and sitting still for a while, not moving on to the next town to play one's old tape for a new crowd.

For the lay member, this may mean *not* serving on boards and committees, *not* covering the crisis phone. Maybe even (horrors!) not always coming to church every Sunday. There are ways to indicate your primary church commitment without being in pew nine, aisle side, every Sunday forever. Or then again, maybe for a lay person it would mean moving to another town and becoming a lay worship coordinator for a new MCC. Or any one of a thousand other possibilities. To read, to study, to go to charismatic prayer meetings of other church groups, to take up music, to get involved in politics and the struggle for God's justice, to renovate a house with your spouse and watch God at work in the garden, to set goals to develop one's prayer life. For my deadly routine may be your spiritual growth, and vice versa. *But to take the space to admit it needs to happen and embrace it and help your church embrace your doing it, not to fear that they are "losing" you.*

Finally, *tone* is all-important. For spiritual growth to happen *in* church there has to be a tone there of love and acceptance. This is something I knew before but have had reason to learn again. A loving atmosphere is easily polluted, but when it is there, it smells so sweet! Recently, I have been working as a "circuit rider" on the circuit of study groups administered by MCC Illiamo in Quincy, Illinois. Illiamo is a small group compared to many of our churches, with only 45 members or so. But it has parented three other groups. Why? Some of it is due to the excellent leadership and skills of its board and Reid Christensen, its pastor. Some of it is due to the accidents of history. But the inescapable key, I think, to it happening has been the consistent Christ-centered commitment and "good vibes" Illiamo has given off these past five years.

The Sunday before Christmas this past year, several members of MCC Columbia, Missouri, and I went up to Quincy to enjoy a church supper and hear the Illiamo Christmas cantata. We happened also to be there for their gift exchange, and when we lingered in the hall to watch them, we were invited to come sit in extra chairs in the center of the room. And so we sat there surrounded by the Illiamo members as they exchanged the Christmas gifts they had purchased for each other by names drawn from a hat. Reid Christensen, who had not expected guests from the other groups, apologized for having no gifts for us, but he need not have. As we sat there, four of us, in the center of that room, beside a glittering Christmas tree, literally surrounded by warmth and light, by the Illiamoans and at least five sets of their parents who were comfortably and naturally present, the "vibes" became more than gift enough. They joked, and they teased, and they made unintelligible group sounds as they exchanged gifts, and each one had to hold his or her gift up and show everyone, to register its appropriateness or imaginativeness for the whole group's approval. Like a well-knit family, you could feel them stop and ponder and nod and smile. The love was hip deep in that room. Beside me, I could feel the Columbia people grow still, and I thought, "This is what MCC is supposed to be, and it's right here all around me." At the end, we visitors looked at each other with dampened eyes and turning to Reid I said, "This was real magical."

It is the absolutely indispensable thing, and without it there can be no church life, nor health, nor growth. In such an atmosphere, there can be spiritual growth. If you, or your church, doesn't have it or is in danger of losing it, stop. Don't go on. For you *cannot* go on without it, and don't try. Wait for it, if need be. It will come, for it has been promised, along with so much else. They also serve who only sit and wait. Amen.

Thunder on the mountain

ON CONTEMPORARY POSSIBILITIES FOR FAITH

F. JAY DEACON

Read: 1 Kings 18:20-40; Matthew 15:21-28

JUST BEFORE the last election, on the McNeil-Lehrer Report on Public Television, there appeared the founder of a group called The Moral Majority, the Virginia-based evangelist Jerry Falwell. He is a flashy charismatic type . . . charismatic not in the religious sense, but in the sense of loudmouthed and able to persuade masses of people to do his thing. He could not conceal his glee as he mowed down the other guest, a priest whom, I am sure, he considers one of those prophets of Baal, the former Congressperson from Massahusetts, Robert Drinan. Which is just as well, because Drinan wasn't any good anyway. The once-bold advocate of progressive causes seemed defensive and apologetic, and couldn't even do any better than to agree with Falwell that homosexuals are perverted.

Falwell has mowed down a lot of false prophets, false by his definition, and was trying hard to restore what he considers a godly king to the throne in America. He and Ronald Reagan had that past weekend endorsed each other.

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Now you understand, I'm pretty fond of the prophet Elijah. But there were days when he acted more like that evangelist from Virginia. He's a flashy charismatic personality, too. Just look at what he did at Mount Carmel.

What you've got here is no more of an ecumenical-spirited gathering than Friday's McNeil-Lehrer Show was. How he engineered that meteorological marvel whereby the lightning or whatever ignites all that soggy material on his altar, I have no idea. When Baal's prophets can't perform the feat, he razzes and harasses them publicly. Then, having proved his point, he *kills* all 450 of his religious competitors.

I used to hear a lot of sermons about this incident. These flashy charismatic evangelists thrived on the story. They'd roar up and down the aisles, get the congregation on their feet, get them all worked up to go out and figuratively slay all the false prophets, the people whose ideas weren't born-again enough, the pervs and homos and all the rest. They put on a good show, but none of them ever could duplicate the fire-on-the-mountain number. And I always wondered about that..

After all, didn't it stand to reason? If it was just as much the truth when these flashy 20th-century evangelists said it as when Elijah said it, then why weren't there any fireworks for *me* to see? In fact, I used to preach their kind of message and I always knew better than to set up a contest like Elijah's, because the few times I'd ever tried anything like that, not a spark. Nothing happened and I'd be embarrassed. So, whatever Elijah's followers, who composed that story, say happened at Mount Carmel, I've never known God to work like that. My experience is different. It's more like the experience Jesus had in that second story from Matthew's Gospel.

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Now the basic message in the first story is that there's one truth and one revelation of God and it's ours, the one we've always known, and it's a once-and-for-all truth that never changes, and we'd better stick to it, or if we've wavered from it somehow, we'd better get back to it or God will be real mad and there won't be any crops. And any evidence that doesn't seem to fit what we already believe must be bent to fit or disregarded because there's no new truth and nobody else could ever get a real revelation. You don't listen to people who tell new stories. You take them down by the river Kishon and get rid of them.

I was taught something like that. Maybe you were. So was Jesus. The story Matthew tells is more startling than we realize.

Jesus has wandered way up north, away from the crowds that usually beseige him, and gone up there into exurbia where you think nobody ever reads the paper and you can find some solace. It was Gentile country, where nobody would have heard of him, but somebody has.

A Canaanite woman. Baal, you'll remember, was the Canaanite fertility god, whose prophets Elijah had challenged. So she's a descendent of those poor prophets of Baal, and she has a deranged daughter, and she's heard that Jesus is a healer.

Now this Canaanite woman was very likely not the least bit interested in the creeds and doctrines that seemed always so important to those flashy evangelists I used to listen to carrying on about Elijah's great miracle, or on this very story about Jesus. She wasn't even a Christian! . . . That's nothing. Jesus wasn't either!

He was a prophet of Israel, as Elijah was: but his message was far more sweeping than Elijah's, and it was causing quite a stir down there in Judea, and yes, she's heard of him. She acknowledges his important relationship to the faith of Israel, but this Gentile Canaanite would not have been interested in the doctrines of another prophet of Israel. She knew of him as a healer . . . as someone who was grounded and centered in a powerful and healing interior relationship with God, the giver of life and healing. That is, he had a very carefully nurtured union with something or someone she was not sure she understood, but whom Jesus understood to be the creator and giver of all life, the power he characterized as Love and demonstrated with remarkable cures. And to me, the power to restore life and health is far more persuasive evidence that God is present than fireworks and the mass slaying of the competition.

Now the way Matthew tells it, it almost sounds like the story of just another Canaanite who'd come around to the acknowledgement of the true king of the true Israel, the church . . . but if we can lay aside our own Judeo-Christian chauvinism, we may have the opportunity to see new truth, to gain a new vision, to find healing where Jesus found it. I just don't believe this Canaanite woman was nearly as interested in doctrinal points as the author of the Gospel of Matthew was.

He's come to her town, and she goes out to see him. And she looks at him, and decides to go the risk of being a fool and trusting. But wait. First, the disciples try to get rid of her. And then, Jesus seems just as uncomfortable with her as they do. He ignores her. She is a Canaanite and she is a woman. You do not take these people seriously. To get healed you had to have

Healing in a far country

faith. Canaanites don't have faith. Not real faith, anyway. Everybody knew that. Or, I should say, everybody learned that.

In this moment, we see Jesus' humanity clearly. He didn't land on earth from outer space, a god walking about the earth unlike the poor humans around him. He was born and raised a first-century Palestinian male, taught the things other children were taught, facing the same conflicts, becoming accustomed to the same fears and prejudices, feeling the same pain, growing, changing, becoming.

When he responds to her the first time, he says what he has learned to say; feels what he has learned to feel. He calls her a dog grabbing for crumbs under the table.

It was easy for him to say that. She was a Canaanite. He knew the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel, facing the prophets of the Canaanite religion. You may remember what happened to Canaanites, or others whose presence has represented the threat of *hearing new truth, seeing another vision, gaining an unexpected experience.*

He had learned not to highly esteem a Canaanite, not to regard them as having any real faith. And she was a woman, and he had not taken any courses in feminism. So he could easily call her a pet dog grabbing for crumbs under the dining table of real people, and consider that a mild remark, and get away with it, given the commonly accepted attitudes of his times.

He hears himself say it. He has heard his own words, and now he hears his own soul and his own soul knows a truth more true to the nature of God he knows so intimately, a truth more powerful than what he has heard himself say just now.

And Jesus has heard his own words, and he does not feel obligated to defend the position he has just taken the way Elijah defended his position in the face of the ancient Canaanites.

Right here, you see, Jesus *could* dig his heels in and become more entrenched in his position and intransigent in his attitude. He won't, though. He is not afraid to recognize a new truth, to see another vision, to gain another experience. He abandons his first position. He reaches out to her. He sees in her eyes and hears in her voice something familiar. There is a common faith, a trust beyond the creeds and doctrines, and there is a chemistry that can heal her daughter. And now he knows what others are afraid to believe, but he is not afraid to believe it – that God is God of all; that there was nothing in this Canaanite woman, nothing at all, that was alien to the nature of God. He experienced a God fuller than our narrowness of vision – not some parochial exclusive God who would acknowledge no relationship with some Canaanite woman, pretending not to know her, refusing to take her seriously. He acknowledged her experience of God as real. More real than the orthodox faith of the Pharisees, because her faith was about to heal someone.

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Why do we fear to hear new truth, to see another vision, to gain an unexpected experience?

Peter Berger, that sociologist of religion, says it's because we only know one way to think about faith. If we have an experience of the divine, we think it's the only experience there is or ever was. If our own people have a history of experiences of the divine, we think there is no experience of God outside of our tradition. We're afraid there can be no other experience, so we cling desperately to what we have.

And so the experience or the tradition that ought to make us rich only impoverishes us and makes us narrow and exclusive, because we fear that there is no other experience. But if God is the creator of all, then God's activity must go far beyond what we know. God must have been active among the Canaanite people, too. God must have been active among those African people our missionaries always wanted to convert. God must have been active among those native Americans whose earth-grounded religions most of us know so little about. And God must have been active among the people of the Indian subcontinent, which produced the prophet Mohandus K. Gandhi. God must have been active in the historic struggle of women, and there's some evidence of that as more and more women turn increasingly toward specifically women's spirituality and away from the traditions they grew up into. Did not God speak as clearly at Mount Fuji and Mount Kenya as at Mount Sinai? Can we learn to replace that word "only" with the word "also?"

All that's very interesting, but here's the real point. All of human history bears witness to this:

People have always had experiences of something beyond the ordinary everyday world, experiences that lift them out of the ordinary and give a more dramatic and sweeping vision of life than they ordinarily see. Experiences that produce a never-to-be-forgotten sense of reality. Experiences when you know you've been on holy ground, when you know the awe that something holy is near, when you sense a kind of deliverance or salvation, a new quality of wholeness. Our experiences are personal and our ways of describing them are human. I know that the people of the Bible had experiences of God. I do not know exactly what those experiences were like, because no description can fully match the experience, and because their descriptions are human. They had a particular bias in describing their experiences. They experienced God. And so do you.

You may not be the kind of religious virtuoso who keeps having ecstatic experiences and prophetic visions, but you have experiences of God. God does not consist of doctrines, but is beyond the doctrines, the One we experience. You ought to trust your experience. You must know it is not the only experience. You must not let any experience, especially somebody else's, become absolute authority for you.

We know very little, most of us, about the experiences of others beyond our own tradition. Sometimes we don't even know much about our own experience because we don't trust it. But if we are not afraid to hear new truth, to see another vision, to gain an unexpected experience, we may gain, with it, new wholeness, fuller life.

You and I and Elijah could gain a fuller life if we could learn from the kind of experience that is grounded in the earth and in the depths of ourselves, as were the native American, the Canaanite, and the religions of the subcontinent of India. To us, God is too often someone out there, up there in the sky, wholly other, not really a part of this earthly round, not really a part of us. We could learn to cherish the earth and to quit raping it. The Moral Majority is not interested in the immorality of America's corporate giants as they poison the earth and the air and the rivers and the

seas. Its members are too afraid of a God who thunders from a mountaintop to hear God's voice whispered softly within themselves.

Doesn't all this imply a value judgment? You bet.

You've got to pick and choose, when you select the components of your own personal faith-vision. And I know of no better criterion than the experience of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. It made someone more whole. It made someone more free. It increased mutuality, esteem, and love between persons and peoples.

You and I and Elijah could gain a fuller life if we would learn from the kind of experience oppressed peoples have had, and now, especially, we could learn from women's spirituality. It could help us reverse the oppressive cycle of domination and submission that marks so much of the way people experience life in this world. Maybe you haven't heard much thunder and lightning at Mount Carmel lately, but you've heard the soft whisper from deep in your own soul saying "I will be your resting place."

You and I could learn from Judaism, which our fundamentalism misrepresents and over which it claims superiority. In the context of Christian churches, Jews are even expected to call themselves "completed Jews." But you know, there's a kind of wholistic vision of life in the Hebrew Bible not matched by the New Testament.

And you know, you and I could learn from our brother Jesus, if we can really see him as he was . . . not as a set of doctrines, but as a bold prophet of Israel far more radical than Elijah, not the founder of a set of Christian doctrines but a lover and healer who never showed much interest in parochial and nitpicking dogma.

We resist this openness. When we say "ecumenical," we almost always mean different kinds of Christians getting together to understand each other, all of whom assume that Christian faith is the only faith!

But if we dare to hear new truth, to see another vision, to experience what we didn't expect, we'll begin to touch the boundaries of our own lives, to really live our experience, to truly see with our own eyes and sense in the deep places of our own spirits the presence of God the way Jesus did. And life will be more full, and our faith will have the power to make us whole.

In a world like ours, the old thunder on the familiar mountain may not resound as clearly as it once did to reassure us. Sometimes it will be in a far country, on the frontiers of our experience, where the miracles will happen for us.

Amen.

Time to reclaim memory

Pages for a Gay Christian book of martyrs

Robert Spike

By THE EDITOR

Paul Spike. *Photographs of My Father*. New York: Knopf, 1973 (out of print).

"THERE WAS A MURDER in there," the chaplain says. "Somebody named Spike." No, he didn't know who Spike was or what it was all about. But then, he didn't work there in '66.

Others knew, had read the book. A secretary who was there at the time remembered. But outside the United Christian Center staff, nobody I talked to in Columbus recognized the name "Robert Spike" at all.

What becomes of the memory of perhaps the brightest, most powerful and most creative among those white clergy who led the civil rights movement in the churches in the sixties? It all depends. If the police, the domestic surveillance people, and the movers and shakers who want to curb an antipoverty program for southern black kids so they can get support from southern politicians for an undeclared war -- can establish the fact that he is a homosexual, or bisexual, or something, and suggest, further, that he was murdered by a trick -- then probably he'll be forgotten. To the tortured relief of those colleagues, friends, and church agencies who've been associated with him.

Now, the New Right at the nation's helm, the "intelligence community" enjoying new freedom from restraint and not a few familiar faces of repression and bigotry back in the centers of power, it could just be that the murder and subsequent amnesia perpetrated against one who stood as a giant in our history -- might have singular and timely significance.

So, *The Gay Christian* set out to see. We do it by way of a review of a book that's been out for eight years, which we'll discuss in view of information *TGC* has learned. *Photographs of My Father* is the work of Paul Spike. His father was Robert Warren Spike.

When he died, Robert Spike was the first Director of the first Doctor of Ministry program anywhere – at the Divinity School, the University of Chicago. He went to Chicago from New York, where he was first the revolutionary pastor of Judson Memorial Church, then General Secretary for program for the Board of Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ, and then Executive Director of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches. Before his brilliant career in New York (actually a national career, taking him back and forth between Mississippi and the White House), he pastored a Baptist church near Columbus, Ohio, where he spent his college days. After seminary at Colgate Rochester, he earned a doctorate in education at Columbia. When he died, he was fighting to save an educational program for poor black youths throughout Mississippi – a program the Johnson Administration wanted to axe. But that's getting ahead of the story.

Paul Spike loved his father, and felt the nurture and strength of his father's love. He'd lived in New Jersey since he was eight – ever since his father left Judson and the family had left The Village. He tells of the joys and traumas of adolescence in a "liberal," permissive home where a minimum of coersion existed. He tells of the love of a father who seems to be making up

for the chill of his own childhood and an abusive, moralistic father.

He tells of a father who had grown far beyond the Baptist theology of his childhood into a "pragmatic Christian existentialism" and who didn't demand a more dogmatically defined faith of his two sons.

In Greenwich Village, Bob Spike sought to move the church into "the middle of the street" by vigorously addressing the teenage gangs, and the bohemians and artists and writers, who inhabited the place. Among the latter were not a few homosexuals. Long hours of conversations in coffeehouses led to important friendships. The friendships continued after the move to the Jersey suburbs.

In the UCC post, Spike participated in a very long meeting at the Harlem YMCA. The group, largely gathered around Spike's friend James Baldwin, had told Attorney General Robert Kennedy that, in Spike's words, "if the government of the United States would not protect them in Mississippi, then they had no intention of ever trying to protect the government of the United States in Cuba or anywhere." Hundreds had just been jailed in Birmingham, Alabama. The National Council of Churches was profoundly disturbed by what it saw and asked Spike to direct a special commission with power for *direct action* toward justice and reconciliation: the Commission on Religion and Race. It was 1963. Three days later, Medgar Evers was shot, and Spike went to Mississippi. His son went to prep school, a repressive and oh-so-polite Baptist institution. The contrast was not lost on Paul Spike, who hoped to get into Harvard. The Summer before prep school, Paul joins his father in Washington, where his father's Commission has helped plan a march. His father has a suite with officials crowding inside and phones ringing. His picture appears on the front page of the Washington Post, with Paul Newman and Marion Anderson.

Martin Luther King and a quarter million others are there, too – and Robert Spike's efforts are responsible for the pressure of 40,000 of them. Then, the assassination of Kennedy, and Spike detects an egomaniac in the White House. Spike is commuting between New York, Washington, and Mississippi. He has several close calls when "night riders" try to kill him on back roads in Mississippi, where the Governor is not sympathetic. He is organizing a summer project, with a thousand volunteers to run remedial "freedom" schools there. He's come into his own. Paul Spike observes, "Enormous stores of energy open inside him." He believes there is "a revolution beginning in the country of vast and perhaps, terrible proportions." The 1964 Democratic Convention has Spike working for a stronger civil rights stand in the platform and a challenge to the segregated Mississippi delegation. He lobbies Hubert Humphrey, who winds up making a deal with Johnson: he'll be Johnson's running mate if he'll remain silent on the black challenge.

Still, Johnson's staff calls Spike reportedly to the White House to help draft the President's speech and proposal about the voting rights bill he's going to introduce. One Monday evening in the Spring of 1965, Johnson tells the nation:

> *"At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's [sic] unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama . . . we* shall *overcome."*

Paul is on the "waiting list" for Harvard, so he accepts admission to Columbia. Columbia is a block from Robert Spike's office at the Interchurch Center. Paul begins seeing the same analyst his father used to see. 1966 arrives, and Robert Spike accepts the position at the University of Chicago. The war in Vietnam is heating up.

A friend of Robert, and of Paul, Spike comes to see Paul. It's late and the friend is somewhere near drunk. He's interesting – a minister, with a lot of contacts inside Washington. They talk about Napalm in Vietnam. They stop by the minister's place for another drink. It's 4 a.m. and the minister is interweaving talk about Robert Spike with talk about getting laid, then talk about homosexuality. There seems to be a point to this. It is clear that the minister is staring at him. "Are you implying something?" Then, "Is my father homosexual?" The minister says yes, he is. Paul objects to the idea that his father is queer. "Sure. I'm a queer," says the minister, "and he's a queer, and so are you." Then, "You ought to go to bed with someone who loves you. I love you, Paul." Paul leaves the apartment in a rage and confusion.

He remembers the clues. He remembers the nights his father couldn't sleep, but tossed on the sofa, torn by a secret agony. He wonders how many times he's mocked, in his father's pained presence, "faggots" and "queers." He calls home, and father and son have an honest talk. It is true. Robert Spike feels the real support of his son. The relationship grows, and Paul reads about homosexuality. He will not betray his father.

Now to support an undeclared war, the President has to have the support of Southern politicians. The Child Development Group of Mississippi is to be the price. It's Spike's network of locally-run "freedom schools." The CDGM has shaken up Senator Stennis, who wants it axed. Stennis is on both the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Appropriations Committee. It's the single largest and most successful part of Johnson's anti-poverty efforts, since it's funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity under Head Start. And Senator Stennis wants it axed, and now Sargent Shriver is telling Spike to get off it, quit fighting to save his program. Shriver says, "The FBI knows about you, Reverend Spike."

Spike visits Paul in New York. Tells him this is the dirtiest fight he's ever been involved in. "There are a lot of terrible things going on in this country these days which people don't know about," he says. Shriver is "one of the nastiest men I have ever met."

It is true. The FBI *does* know about him. They've been following him around the country. That's what the FBI tells the lawyer the NCC has retained in the days following the murder. No one needed to tell the Spikes that their phones had been tapped for years.

Spike learns that the government has found another way to fight. It will co-opt his colleagues. It will compromise anyone it can. Spike meets with a group of people involved in the CDGM and they agree that the OEO is out to destroy CDGM. They will write a report and expose what they know. They will disclose the fact that the National Student Foundation, an important part of the effort in Mississippi, has fallen under the control of the CIA, which has been secretly funding it. They will meet back in Washington after the weekend. When they meet again, most of them back down. They have "changed their minds." Something or somebody has compromised them. Spike is furious, and will fight.

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The secretary told me that a janitor found the bludgeoned body at 1:30 p.m. on October 17, 1966. The police told her it was still warm. She's been working there since 9 a.m. and had thought he was on a plane heading for Chicago. He was being

murdered in the apartment on the same floor as the offices, but she's heard nothing.

Robert Spike had flown into Columbus to dedicate the United Christian Center at Ohio State University. He preached about love: "the willingness to be vulnerable to open ourselves even to the point of death -- that is what love is all about," the sermon said. Before there was a liberation theology, he was formulating one, and that was a second part of his sermon. The third part was about work:

> *Let us spend a few minutes on the question, "Where to work?" What I refer to here is not at all the narrow question, "How am I going to earn my living?", although that's an important one. I am talking about the much broader questions: "What is there that cries out from the midst of the world that demands that I work at that job? What are the compelling prime needs of our time that will determine where I invest my energies, to what I give my life with passion?" As we look across the face of the world there are many ways in which we could summarize what it is that is tearing the world apart, churning it up, bringing people to battle fields, to places of ultimate decision. But I think the easiest way of summing it up is to say that this world, every part of it, is in struggle for freedom.*

Spike hadn't been sure of whether or not to stay overnight, given his schedule, but the unfinished Center had an apartment. There was nothing to do in Columbus on Sunday nights: the bars weren't open. He was found with a list of "suspect" bars in Columbus. Funny. If they weren't open anyway . . . and who needs a list of gay bars in a town you know as well as Spike knew Columbus? He'd visited it frequently since he'd lived there. But the Columbus Police and the Federal authorities carefully pointed out that he'd been found with a list of gay bars. And nothing on but a raincoat. Paul Spike had travelled with his father enough to know that his father used his raincoat for a bathrobe when he travelled, but *that* was not a fact that served the government's characterization of a queer. He was found also, they said, with "pornographic magazines." Which can only be considered the truth if you consider *Health and Sunshine*, a bodybuilding magazine, porn.

The Columbus Police were famous for racism. Together with the Chicago Police, they cooperated closely with the FBI and the CIA in repressive policies. Dispute that if you will. The carpenters still had keys. Some say that the carpenter's union is the most reactionary, illiberal union in America. Dispute that if you will. No clues were found. Robert Spike's head had been smashed open with a hammer. There was no real investigation. But the police feed the press the homosexual angle. As if a maniac trick did it, one so brilliant as to leave not a trace of evidence.

The "evidence" about homosexuality is out and the churches are scared. A group of Ohio ministers urge that the building that Robert Spike had dedicated be "re-dedicated."

Friends and associates of Spike are getting phone calls. The police are calling all the names in his personal address book and asking, "Did you know that Rev. Spike was homosexual?"

The murder will never be solved. Questions remain.

Irritated by his program's dependence on the conservative money of the National Council of Churches, Spike has found a monied friend in Steven Currier, who was head of the Taconic Foundation, which dispensed money from the fortune of Andrew Mellon. He had poured millions into the movement during the early sixties. Now, Spike and Currier would put together "Urban America," a more independent organization which would tackle the trickier racial problems of the North and all sorts of hitherto untouched economic issues. Currier disappeared on a flight in the Bahamas. Not a scrap of wreckage ever found. Why?

The UPI was set to break an important story after two reporters had worked on Spike's murder and found information giving the murder an entirely new context. It never appeared. The story about CIA funding of the NSA did appear. At the NSA office one day, CIA operatives appear to have been putting the screws on its national leaders. Heard outside the inner office was a warning. The NSA leaders should be careful: "You saw what happened to Robert Spike."

What happened when the Child Development Group of Mississippi reapplied for OEO funding in 1966? What price did the Johnson Administration agree to pay Southern racists to keep Mississippi solidly within the Democratic Party and supportive of the administration? What was the intent of Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP), an apparent replacement for CDGM with administration support and a white board (whose members included Hodding Carter)? When CDGM was threatened, Spike's allies set up Citizen's Crusade Against Poverty to see that CDGM was re-funded. Walter and Victor Ruether joined Spike as prime movers. Whatever happened to Walter Ruether? How were other voices of protest silenced?

Why did not the National Council of Churches, or any other church agency, have the endurance to wait in the face of the storm, to launch a thorough investigation, and to confront the smokescreen of innuendo and dirt and so preserve the good name of a warrior for justice who was possessed of singular integrity? Why the Christian silence?

What kind of human being or politician does it take to kill? How do human beings and politicians kill, through what instrumentalities? How are sexual dynamics used to kill us?

Who killed the prophets of justice in America during the sixties? Who killed Robert Spike?

The New Right now controls the Senate Intelligence Committee. What surveillance, what manipulation, what perils might we expect? The New Right now controls the Judiciary Committee, the Appropriations Committee, and all the rest, because it controls the Senate. It controls the White House. Not just gutless "liberals" trying to accommodate the Right. The Right itself. What does this mean?

And what will be our response? To hide in our pretend, as though it isn't so? To roll over and die of despair? Or to recover a saint and to be infused with the grace of his endurance, his courage, his integrity, his vision?

It may be of some comfort to whatever there be that remains of Robert Spike that beginning on November 2, 1980, the Metropolitan Community Church of Columbus, Ohio worships freely in the place his death made holy. Not the FBI, not the CIA, not the police, need track its comings and goings to discover, for the purpose of manipulating it and discrediting it, its secret. They, and the world, know what is not secret. The word "gay," and the word "lesbian," are out. The secret agony continues for those who cannot say the words out loud. And against those who can, there is still enough hate and fear to continue the cruelty. But in honor of the dead and for the sake of the living, the irony is wonderful.

Reviewed:

Beyond the Bible:

Silenced voices of the early church

By STEVE CARSON

Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels*, **New York: Random House, 1979, Illustrated. 182 pp. Hardcover $10. Random House Vintage Books paper edition, 1981, $2.95.**

THE LONGER I journey in my life with this Fellowship, the more I realize that the question facing us is the question of revelation: Where is God to be found?

This is the question that by other names is the question of authority or, if we look at Jesus, christology. It is a question that appears in another form less addressed in this church—the role of the Bible. How are we to read that collection of stories and letters that make up what we call the Bible? What has that to do with the revelation of God?

Most of us recognize that the Bible did not drop one day out of the sky fully written, table of contents and all. It represents a not-too-neat selection of certain writings over others. We are familiar with the Gospel of Matthew, or John, but few of us have read the Gospel of Thomas, or Philip, or Mary . . . or have heard of books called "The Testimony of Truth," or "The Dialogue of the Savior," or "Thunder, Perfect Mind."

Yet these are texts that were written at the same time as the other New Testament books. They were held by certain Christian communities to be accurate records of the life and teachings of Jesus. But these texts were successfully suppressed by the orthodox church. They were not admitted into the New Testament canon. In fact, copies found by church authorities were most likely burned (probably along with their owners). These were the writings of early Christians who valued the experience of what they called "gnosis," meaning "wisdom" or "knowledge." These early Christians are today called "gnostics."

So the writings of these gnostic Christians were often hidden— sometimes put in earthen jars and sealed away in the dry caves of the desert.

Thirty five years ago, near the small town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt, an Arab farmer was digging up soft dirt for his garden. He found a huge earthen jar which, it turned out, contained 52 papyrus texts—dating from the beginning of the Christian era. After a complicated route through Cairo bazaars, the texts finally made it into the hands of scholars at the British Museum, where they have been studied for years. They have recently been compiled, translated and published as *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by J.M. Robinson.

Elaine Pagels, who is chair of the department of religion at Barnard College, Columbia University, worked with these scholars in the editing of these documents. In *The Gnostic Gospels*, she has written the first scholarly account of these texts for the general reader. What these documents reveal should be of interest to all who care about the Bible, who recognize the intricacies of political theology (or theological politics), or who seek a fuller understanding of God.

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The context of these early Christian communities, and the issues they faced, are not unlike those of today, even within MCC.

> *. . . diverse forms of Christianity flourished in the early years of the Christian movement. Hundreds of rival teachers all claimed to teach the 'true doctrine of Christ' and denounced one another as frauds. Christians in churches scattered from Asia Minor to Greece, Jerusalem and Rome split into factions, arguing over church leadership. All claimed to represent 'the authentic tradition'. (p. 7).*

The issue of authority—and revelation and christology—came home in the interpretation of the resurrection. Pagels notes that the orthodox leadership taught that Jesus rose physically from the dead and after forty days ascended into heaven. They likewise taught that it is after death that the Christian will also share in the resurrection. The gnostics, on the other hand, believed in the continuing presence of Christ and in Christ's continuing revelation within the experience of the believer.

> *Those who say they will die first and then rise are in error. (Instead they must) receive the resurrection while they live.* The Gospel of Philip (p. 12)

The gnostics valued individual experience. They believed that it is in one's experience that one knows God.

> *. . . examine yourself so that you may understand who you are . . . For whoever has not known oneself has known nothing, but whoever has known oneself has simultaneously achieved knowledge about the depth of all things.* The Book of Thomas the Contender (p. 19).
>
> *Jesus said, 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.* The Gospel of Thomas (p. xv).

Of course, such theology was not without its critics. Iranaeus, the orthodox bishop of Lyons, complains that

> *every one of them generates something new every day . . . They are to be blamed for . . . describing human feelings, and passions, and mental tendencies . . . and ascribing the things that happen to human beings and* whatever they recognize themselves as experiencing, *to the divine Word. (p. 19).*

The orthodox were insistent that after forty days Christ ascended, leaving all teaching and authority with the Twelve. Pagels probes behind these statements of doctrine to discern why they became so important.

> *All Christians agreed in principle that only Christ himself–or God–can be the ultimate source of spiritual authority. But the immediate question, of course, was the practical one: Who, in the present, administers that authority? (p. 25).*

Pagels reasons that the orthodox doctrine of the resurrection and ascension, in political terms, concludes the revelation of Jesus after the forty days on earth and leaves the revelation in the hands of the apostles, who, Paul reminds us, needed to be actual witnesses of the resurrection. All the power of the orthodox church, especially with its doctrine of apostolic succession, is based on this deposit of authority with the apostles after the resurrection.

> *These gnostics recognized that their theory, like the orthodox one, bore political implications. It suggests that whoever 'sees the Lord' through inner vision can claim that his or her own authority equals, or surpasses, that of the Twelve–and of their successors (p. 13-14).*

Attendant with the theological statement is its political counterpart. The gnostics knew it. The orthodox knew it. The attacks and counter-attacks come out in the wrrings.

> *(The gnostics) argued that only one's own experience offers the ultimate criterion of truth taking precedence over all secondhand testimony and all tradition–even gnostic tradition . . . (in "The Apocalypse of Peter"), the risen Christ explains to Peter that those who 'name themselves bishop, and also deacon, as if they had received their authority from God', are, in reality, 'waterless canals' (p. 25).*

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Pagels investigates how the early Christian doctrines of God reflected and sustained political relations and relations between men and women. The gnostics rejected the limited orthodox conception of God.

> *They insisted on discriminating between the popular image of God–as master, king, lord, creator, and judge–and what that image represented–God understood as the ultimate source of all being (p. 32).*

Some gnostics began to believe in two gods: an inferior god who created the world with all its faults, and a wiser, more hidden god known only to initiates. But many gnostics simply insisted on not confusing how God is described with all that God is. The orthodox found it easier to attack the gnostics for believing in more than one god. They chose to affirm traditional ways of describing God. Pagels searches out the political implications of this position and finds Ignatius, orthodox bishop of Antioch, warning the laity to revere, honor, and obey the bishop 'as if he were God' (p. 35). She points out

> *As God reigns in heaven as master, lord, commander, judge, and king, so on earth he delegates his rule to members of the church hierarchy, who serve as generals who command an army of subordinates, kings who rule over 'the people', judges who preside in God's place. (p. 35).*

It is interesting that gnostic writings tend to balance out overly male imagery for God. In addition to God the Father, God is described by the gnostics as "Grace . . . Silence . . . the Womb" (p. 50). An important gnostic text is the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. In it the risen Christ reveals wisdom to Mary, who became an apostle and leader in her own right. Why were these images suppressed?

Pagels sees the answer to that question in the "practical, social consequences (the gnostics derived) from their concepts of God and of humanity" (p. 59). We must look at how female imagery for God affected early Christian communities. Bishop Iranaeus noted "with dismay that women especially are attracted to heretical groups" (p. 59). Apparently there is a connection between the power of the female in God and the power of women in communities. It is those gnostic communities who describe God as mother as well as father, or who give authority to women apostles, in which women participate and share leadership. This to the horror of the orthodox (male) leadership. Wrote Tertullian somewhere near the year 190:

> *These heretical women–how audacious they are! They have no modesty; they are bold enough to teach, to engage in argument, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures, and, it may be, even to baptize! (p. 60).*

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The crucifixion presented Christians with a problem: how could God die, especially such an ignominious death as on a cross? Many interpretations of Jesus' death circulated among Christian groups. Some believed that it somehow wasn't Jesus who died on the cross. Such belief was prevalent among gnostic Christians.

> *The Saviour said to me, 'He whom you saw being glad and laughing above the cross is the Living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his fleshy part, which is the substitute.* The Apocalypse of Peter (p. 72).

Such belief was rejected by the orthodox church. Why did the gnostics tend to support it? Pagels reminds us that these

texts were written in a time of persecution. Christians, whether gnostic or orthodox routinely faced a life or death decision of faith. Pagels points out that often orthodox leadership connected the torture of Christ with the way all Christians could fulfill their faith. Bishop Ignatius was condemned to Rome to be killed by wild beasts in the public amphitheater. In his letters to the Christians in Rome he wrote

> *Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become pure bread of Christ . . . Let there come upon me fire, and the cross, and struggle with the wild beasts, cutting and tearing apart, racking of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body . . . may I but attain to Jesus Christ! (p. 82).*

This is the context in which the crucifixion debate occurred. Christians were being dragged off to be killed, and the orthodox leadership was saying that this fulfills what it means to follow Christ. In examining "The Apocalypse of Peter," Pagels writes

> *What the gnostic writer dislikes most about these Christians is that they coerce innocent fellow believers 'to the executioner'–apparently the forces of the Roman state–under the illusion that if they 'hold fast to the name of a dead man', confessing the crucified Christ, 'they will become pure'. The author says 'These are the ones who oppress their brothers and sisters, saying to them, 'Through this (martyrdom) our God shows mercy, since salvation comes to us through this (p. 93).*

In the end, the gnostic rejection of the physical death of Jesus was rejected by the church. Orthodoxy declared that it was Jesus who died–physically and completely–on the cross. Pagels describes favorably the importance of this judgement.

> *. . . orthodox tradition implicitly affirms bodily experience as the central fact of human life . . . the orthodox insisted that (Jesus), like the rest of humanity, was born, lived with a family, became hungry and tired, ate and drank wine, suffered and died (p. 101).*

***

The question "Whose church is the 'true church'? was answered differently by the orthodox and by the gnostics. The orthodox set objective criteria for church membership.

> *Whoever confessed the creed, accepted the ritual of baptism, participated in worship, and obeyed the clergy was accepted as a fellow Christian (p. 104).*

The gnostics saw this kind of faith as shallow, even naive or magical.

> *The gnostic understand Christ's message not as offering a set of answers, but as encouragement to engage in a process of searching (p. 112).*

Pagels offers a balanced judgement of these two viewpoints. The orthodox position offered a rejection of elitism. It was open to all; whereas the gnostics tended toward an elitism of "wisdom" or "vision." But, Pagels points out, orthodoxy was open to all "who would submit to their system of organization" (p. 118). That system was based on a rigid view of doctrine, ritual, and clerical hierarchy. It was based on the domination of the clergy over the laity and on the exclusion of all "other" experience.

WHAT DOES THE EXPERIENCE OF GNOSTIC COMMUNITIES HAVE TO SAY TO COMMUNITIES TODAY WRESTLING WITH ISSUES OF AUTHORITY AND EXPERIENCE, OF CLERGY AND LAITY, OF WHAT A CHURCH IS, OF SACRIFICE, INCLUSIVITY, OF JESUS AS THE REVELATION OF GOD? THE CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES, DOCUMENTED IN THESE TEXTS, WAS ONE OF A DRAMATIC INTERPLAY OF THE POLITICAL AND THE THEOLOGICAL, NOT UNLIKE OUR OWN CONTEXT. IF THERE WAS A CHURCH THAT WAS OPEN TO LESBIANS AND GAY MEN SOMEWHERE IN ASIA MINOR IN THE FIRST CENTURY, WOULD IT HAVE BEEN "ORTHODOX" OR "GNOSTIC"?

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The gnostics believed that God would be found through individual experience or vision. (This is true of other traditions that exist within Christianity, such as the Quaker and Baptist traditions.) The gnostics "resisted accepting the authority of the clergy, the creed, and the New Testament canon" (p. 121). Because of this, gnostics (and others) have traditionally been hated.

The gnostics believed that whoever achieves "gnosis" becomes "no longer a Christian, but a Christ" (p. 134). They found ultimate authority only in the self.

> *Knock upon yourself as upon a door and walk upon yourself as upon a road. For if you walk on the road, it is impossible for you to go astray . . . Open the door for yourself that you may know what is . . . Whatever you will open for yourself, you will open. –Teachings of Silvanus (p. 127).*

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Pagels' book is a fair account. It is fair to the diversity of the texts and of the communities that produced and read them. Gnosticism was never a monolithic movement. It is category used today to name a similar system of belief and thought. Pagels is true to this diversity. For example, she explains the many ways male and female images for God were described in various gnostic communities, sometimes slipping into complicated sexual ontologies of male and female gods.

Pagels is also fair in her judgements of Gnosticism. While she obviously admires much they were attempting to say, she is clear about negative aspects of their systems of thought. She consistently examines what orthodoxy saved.

For example, the orthodox interpretation of the passion and resurrection affirms that "Human life is inseparable from bodily experience . . . gnostics . . . frequently devalued the body" (p. 26). Gnosticism also tended to be a-historical, creating a spiritual time-frame outside of suffering, death, and the events of history. The specificity of Christian revelation validates history. It really happens. It is not an illusion. Lastly, Pagels points out that Gnosticism was not an effective mass religion. It catered to an intellectual and spiritual elite. It proved hard to organize.

Orthodoxy succeeded in establishing Christianity as a permanent world religion.

The author's scholarship is evident. Her first-hand experience with the texts and her many subsequent publications allow her to write comprehensively about these texts. Her insights into the interplay of the political and the theological are carefully thought out. Pagels has written an accessible, readable book—available in many bookstores in paperback for $2.95.

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The Gnostic Gospels is a book that makes the characters of the New Testament suddenly more real. The conflicts, differing views, the many interpretations of Christ all seem more feasible than the neatness the church has made from its canon. The reader's imagination comes alive and the search for God becomes even more intriguing.

The same cast of characters (Peter, Mary, Philip) gives a whole new impression. In the New Testament God is portrayed as "Other"; the gnostics found that self-knowledge was knowledge of God. The Jesus of the canon teaches sin and repentence. The Jesus of the gnostic texts teaches illusion and insight. The orthodox Jesus is seen as ascended and in heaven. The gnostic Jesus is the experience of the believer.

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Elaine Pagels has written a book that is important for the church today, and for our Fellowship. We see today "the flourishing of diverse forms of Christianity . . . rival teachers all claiming the 'true doctrine of Christ' . . . communities resisting the authority of the clergy, the creed, and the New Testament canon.'

What does the experience of gnostic communities have to say to communities today wrestling with issues of authority and experience, of clergy and laity, of what a church is, of sacrifice, inclusivity, of Jesus as the revelation of God? The context of early Christian communities, documented in these texts, was one of a dramatic interplay of the political and the theological, not unlike our own context. If there was a church that was open to lesbians and gay men somewhere in Asia Minor in the first century, would it have been "orthodox" or "gnostic"?

Self-knowledge as knowledge of God should not come as a new thing to lesbian and gay people. For many of us, it was not that long ago we felt distant from ourselves, from others, and from God. We know how that is all somehow connected. Our coming out has been our journey of faith: to ourselves, to others, and to God. Coming out has established for us very clearly what God is not. We know that God is richer and deeper and smaller and grander than the easy statements of faith we often grew up with. Coming out has established us as a people of faith.

"Bibliolatry" is a form of idolatry in which the sentences of the Bible are in effect worshipped over the Living God. It is a form of blindness. (Jesus warned against blindness repeatedly.) As lesbian and gay people of faith, we should know better. We know the so-called anti-gay passages of scripture were not meant to separate us from God. Most of us reject the "authoritativeness" of scripture that condones slavery or the submission of women. We recognize that political realities shape theology . . . and that even a book called "Holy" is not immune. We need to bring our experience of the living word of God to bear on the Bible—all of it. We cannot neatly forget about the anti-homosexuality parts and then treat the rest as if it were carved in stone.

The journey of faith is so often the sorting out of lies. So much we were told that simply isn't true. The journey of faith is an attitude of openness to the ever-present question: where is God? And we find that search so much more difficult and wonderful once we look up from the Bible. Where is God? Perhaps 'not in a set of answers, but in the encouragement to search.' These forgotten gnostic communities, as much as the orthodox, bear witness to God.

An interesting question occurs reading about the gnostics and then looking at the church today: did the gnostics in effect "win"? Christianity so often presents a disembodied spiritual Christ, and the reality of suffering and of history is given up to an otherworldly "Beulah land." The very things the orthodox tradition fought so hard to eradicate has apparently become the belief of the church. Upon closer examination, it is a little more complex—and disheartening. It seems that the modern church has taken much of "gnostic content," yet has kept the rigid authority patterns of traditional orthodoxy. Jesus and God are immune to change, limited in large degree to the pages of scripture, and mediated by the powers of the church.

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God is present in the tradition. God is present in the Bible. However, God is not frozen there. Methodist tradition identifies four cornerstones of authority: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. All of these must be brought to bear on our understanding of God. This wider recognition of authority may help us as a Fellowship as we search out the questions of inclusivity, christology, and even our understanding of trinitarianism.

The promise of MCC is becoming increasingly urgent. Religion in America is experiencing a growing split . . . similar to that faced in the 1920's or in Europe after the Enlightenment, when people were pushing boldly into new areas and most people were threatened and scared. The question in those times of change became more and more the question of where to find authority. Now, as then, the church is becoming divided more and more into the camps of "liberal" and "fundamentalist." The fundamentalists, in greater and greater number and with increasing visibility, bring a message of hatred for gays, women, and people of color. They are authoritarian in their politics, their sex roles, and in their biblical theology. Their attitude toward the Bible is inseparable from their politics. It is a phenomenon very close to fascism. On the other hand, we have the liberals: a smaller band, increasingly intimidated, increasingly silent. They have not in the past proven an effective block to the rise of fascism.

This is why the promose of MCC is so urgent. We are such a strange combination of fundamentalist and liberal! We need to draw from our more fundamental background our sense of openness to the spirit of God at work in our lives. We need to draw from our identification as a liberal home for lesbians and gay men, a church where inclusivity matters. The liberals are so often dead to the spirit . . . and the fundamentalist have no good news for gay people or women. MCC is for many of us the hope of something new, of becoming a truly living expression of the word of God: in spirit and in freedom, grounded in scripture and tradition, and in experience and reason, continually open to the word of God. We claim the orthodox tradition of biblically based community, tempered by the "gnostic" tradition of claiming experience in our lives.

The Gnostic Gospels warns us against bibliolatry. It calls us to be faithful to our experience of God in our lives. There is much to be learned from voices that have been silenced.

Boswell: a new standard of excellence

By THE EDITOR

John Boswell. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. **Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. Illustrated. 424 pp. $27.50.**

I SUSPECT THAT IT was at just the right time when, this past Fall, John Boswell's towering work of scholarship finally emerged from many years' preparation—to face wide critical acclaim.

The painstaking and scrupulous research that culminates in the publication of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* extended literally to the last detail. I used to call Boswell periodically to inquire whether his book might soon appear. Three years ago, he told me he was nearly finished—given a little more work on indexing and footnotes. Both, incidentally, justify the delay: readers skipping the page-bottom footnotes will miss much of the best material.

Long before those final technical labors, there were two years poking around European archives, and prodigious translating of little-known texts available in American libraries—for Boswell, at Harvard, where he studied, and at Yale, where, at 33, he teaches medieval history.

Which, as I have suggested, couldn't have been a more timely effort. The social, religious, and political fortunes of gay people (that is what he calls them—a first in scholarly writing) are subject to precipitous change, as will be seen. Today, the jury is out. Gay/lesbian progress against ancient prejudice is evident in religious institutions, where it seems to have hit upon a limit; and in the public media, where for the first time in modern history, gay/lesbian people appear as human beings. Yet small political gains may now be reversed as civil rights in America become more annoyance than urgency. There is no telling where religious institutions may go with the issues of sexuality and homosexuality.

Maybe they'll read Boswell. If there is any progress now, it will be because of his unassailable scholarship. From now on, it will be hard for the bishops, the TV evangelists, the reactionary politicians and those alleging learning to argue as they have with a straight face.

The historical reconstruction is begun with the announcement that this is a tough job just begun with much more terrain to be explored, and proceeds to the debunking of a few popular distortions about Roman history. Homosexual practices were not illegal, he asserts, but easily integrated into the life of the Republic. And in the Empire, the first legal actions against homosexual behavior "can be dated precisely to the third century A.D., when a series of laws was enacted regulating various aspects of homosexual relations, ranging from the statutory rape of minors to gay marriage" (70f). Not until the sixth century were homosexual relations categorically prohibited.

Until the time of this legislation, attempts were made to sway public opinion and policy against the easy acceptance gay people found, but these were almost universally unsuccessful. Gay emperors, bishops and monks, soldiers, common citizens, and divinities flourished. In matters of sexuality, the sex of one's partner was of monumental indifference. Statues of Antinous, lover of Hadrian, the most outstanding of the "five good emperors" (117-38), dotted the ancient world—and the enormous appeal of their love shows up in fiction, poetry, coinage, architecture, and art. But the decline of the Empire and its great urban centers would eventually dampen the expansive spirit of Rome.

Another inaccuracy set right: that homosexuality had something to do with the fall of Rome. Bishops seem especially to love this one, but Boswell demonstrates that instead, the deterioration of Rome's vitality had something to do with fear and repression aimed at minorities.

Hostility to gay/lesbian people and homosexual behavior first arose on a massive scale during the period of the dissolution of the Roman state from the third to the sixth centuries, as urban culture fell apart and repressive government sought desperately to exert power by curbing nonconformity, legislating morality, and seeking scapegoats. But the revival of urban life restored gay culture, too. By the eleventh century there again appeared gay literature, a visible and substantial gay minority, and prominent gay people in all levels of church and society.

Then, abruptly, a general increase in intolerance toward minorities and a rise in coerced conformity resulted in a violent shift in the status of gay people. For the causes of this change Boswell cannot fully account. But the effects remain with us: until the present century, gay culture was unable to reassert itself. Boswell summarizes:

> *During the 200 years from 1150 to 1350, homosexual behavior appears to have changed, in the eyes of the public, from the personal preference of a prosperous minority, satirized*

and celebrated in popular verse, to a dangerous, antisocial, and severely sinful aberration. Around 1100, the efforts of prominent churchmen liked and respected by the pope could not prevent the election and consecration as bishop of a person well known to be leading a gay life-style, and much of popular literature of the day—often written by bishops and priests—dealt with gay love, gay life-styles, and a distinct gay subculture. By 1300, not only had overtly gay literature all but vanished from the face of Europe, but a single homosexual act was enough to prevent absolutely ordination to any clerical rank, to render one liable to prosecution by ecclesiastical courts or—in many places—to merit the death penalty.

The reference is to Ralph, Archbishop of Tours, who persuaded the king of France to install as Bishop of Orleans Ralph's lover John. Despite appeals to Pope Urban II to block the appointment, John was consecrated on March 1, 1098 and served with distinction for forty years.

Anti-homosexual voices were raised, and Boswell tracks them, too, engaging their theological arguments sometimes at length—e.g., Anselm and Aquinas. And, as has been said, stormclouds appeared. Finally, even kings were not safe from the gathering fury. There is the story of King Edward II of England, murdered by the insertion into his anus of a red-hot poker; and of his lover of thirteen years, Piers Gaveston, first exiled by Edward I and the, after Edward II recalled him, exiled twice more by Parliament, and finally tortured (his genitals cut off and publicly burned) and then decapitated—or so the best available description of Gaveston's end goes.

Professor Boswell examines these developments against persuasive evidence that the earliest church had nothing to say about homosexuality per se; that none of the most prominent or inflential Christian writers considered homosexual attraction "unnatural;" that none of these writers sought to marshal teachings of Jesus or his early followers as objections to physical expression of homosexual feelings. It must be supposed that later biblical arguments against homosexuality are manufactured ammunition for a hatred whose origins must be sought elsewhere—or against some enemy who must tactically be accused of something shocking.

The time of the Crusades illustrates: Islam had practiced a relative tolerance of homosexuality—never a topic of early Christian anti-Muslim polemic. Now, Muslims were widely characterized as sexually degenerate and given to unrestrained homosexuality. The caricature was more effective if homosexuality could be made out to be shocking.

Meanwhile, all minorities became scapegoats. The Third Lateran Council (1179) both became the first ecumenical council to rule against homosexual acts, and issues a series of statutes to curb Jewish economic and civil power. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) struck Jews with sweeping prohibitions against social interaction and economic participation. In this climate, religious and biblical arguments against homosexuality were crafted.

These Boswell examines. He devotes an 18-page appendix to the lexicography of Paul. Here, we learn more about "malakoi" and "arsenokoitai," words that have bedeviled biblical interpreters for years (and with which interpreters have bedeviled gay people), that we have previously read in all popularly accessible sources available until now.

His 27-page chapter on the Scriptures is good enough, though not the strength of the book. Here, Boswell falls into the gratuitous defense of the indefensible position pioneered by Derrick Sherwin-Bailey and promoted by McNeill that the verb "to know" (yadha) in the Gen. 19 Sodom narrative is no sexual reference. He unaccountably defies the basic hermeneutic rule that the first clue to the meaning of a word is its immediate context, and the second its usage in a parallel pericope. In Gen. 19:8, just three verses after the reference in question, the sexual meaning is unambiguous: two daughters who have not "known" man. The obvious parallel is Jud. 19, where, in a remarkably similar scenario, there appears this: "Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him" (v. 22), and "the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them: and they knew her" (v. 25), in the context of an invitation to "ravish" both her and the host's virgin daughter, so long as the male guest be left unmolested. Our scholarly friends ought to quit the hopeless argument that *yadha* is not a sexual reference and instead argue the obvious: in Gen. 19, it's homosexual rape, just as it is heterosexual rape in Jud. 19. In both cases the issue is coercion. In both cases there's little concern about the sex of the rapee. More important, in both cases there is contempt for women, even one's own daughter, whereas absolute dignity is afforded the male guest. Biblical sexism and mysogyny is no adequate basis for a modern ethic!

Terms and concepts Boswell explores in more or less depth include "nature," "abomination," temple prostitute, effeminacy, "gay," and the linkage between homosexuality and heresy.

Maybe the finest joy of these 424 pages of brilliance is Boswell's citing of gay literature, much of it never before published—not, at least, accurately translated. There is the Roman myth of gay Ganymede, and there are love poems. Like this one by Hilary the Englishman, addressed in the Twelfth Century to an English boy:

Beautiful boy, flower fair,
Glittering jewel, if only you knew
That the loveliness of your face
Was the torch of my love.

The moment I saw you,
Cupid struck me; but I hesitate,
For my Dido holds me,
And I fear her wrath.

"Boy" doesn't quite mean child: it's applied affectionately to adults. Boswell's command of English, of Provencial, and Latin, and Hebrew, and Greek, and Arabic, and French, and a multitude of other languages, assures that the footnotes are loaded with clues about the nuance of this or that word. He also provides samples of anti-homosexual writings, some of which feature curious arguments about Hyenas, alleged to grow new anuses every year so as to engage in homosexual intercourse, or, variously, to the effect that animals do not engage in homosexual intercourse, so, of course, such behavior among humans is "against nature." And there's commentary on the way things were, more or less neutrally offered. Like this, also from Hilary's pen:

The pope's organ misses nothing: boys and girls please the pope. Old men and old women please the pope.

The New York Times Book Review, whose editors list *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* among their "eleven best books of the year," began its August 10 review thus: "John Boswell restores one's faith in scholarship . . . I would not hesitate to call his book revolutionary, for it sets a standard of excellence that one would have thought impossible in the treatment of an issue so large, uncharted and vexed."

To which TGC gratefully says, Amen. We are indebted.

"Don't Let It Spread"

SAN FRANCISCO GAYS TARGETED; THEY RESPOND

SAN FRANCISCO–A coalition of fundamentalists announced in February its intention to spend $3 million on a media campaign to build anti-homosexual feeling in the community, and gay and lesbian religious leaders responded with a pledge to pray for their opponents' change of heart and to defend themselves from "so-called religious people" who urge the "destruction of the freedom and even the lives of homosexual men and women."

The fundamentalist announcement coincided with a weeklong series of special reports that headlined KRON-TV's evening news and featured interviews with leaders of the Moral Majority, California For A Biblical Morality, and In God We Trust. During the broadcasts two ministers advocated the execution of gay people. While others interviewed, including a group called Cops for Christ, shied away from that severity of punishment, all agreed that homosexuality is a sin comparable to murder.

The media campaign was being conducted by In God We Trust, beginning with a $100,000 radio blitz and a mailing targeted toward homophobes from whom they hope eventually to solicit the $3 million for more, including TV commercials.

One of the TV ads was seen on the KRON broadcasts. The 60-second spot begins with shots of both bizarre and average looking participants in the Gay Pride parade and closes with the innocent-looking face of a little girl superimposed with the caption, "Don't Let It Spread."

In God We Trust wants to undo the city's gay rights ordinance because gays and lesbians, according to founder Rev. Richard Zone, "are not a legitimate minority." That's because "their only link is immorality and sex abberation." Zone, 31, split from the Christian Voice lobbying group which he also founded to organize In God We Trust. Among those calling for the death penalty was Dean Wyckoff of the Santa Clara Moral Majority, which last year succeeded in repealing gay rights ordinances in San Jose and Santa Clara County. He called San Francisco "the Sodom and Gomorrah of the United States and the armpit of this perverted movement."

Meanwhile, at the Metropolitan Community Church, a group of gay and lesbian

A STATEMENT FROM THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF THE LESBIAN AND GAY COMMUNITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

February 13, 1981

Introduction

In recent days hate-filled voices have been raised urging the destruction of the freedom and even the lives of the homosexual men and women of this city. Some have announced their intention to "wage war" upon our community, to break up our community, drive us into hiding and, apparently, then to hunt us down and put us to death. To our horror and shame these people call themselves followers of the Living God. As Christians and Jews, children of that same God, we are bound by our consciences to issue this statement.

To Legitimate Religious Leaders and Communities

We seek your immediate and total denunciation of these voices of fear and hate. We urge the truly religious, whatever their views on homosexuality, to renounce the use of coercion, force, or violence against gay and lesbian people.

To the Lesbian and Gay Community

We call upon every member of our community to use this so-called "moral war" as an opportunity to re-affirm our love for one another and to renew our dedication to continuing all our efforts to free ourselves and our world from every oppression. We must realize now, in the face of our opponents' hatred, that it is not our comfort that is at stake. It is not our prosperity. It is not even just our freedom. Our very lives are at stake.

Further, as believers in the God of Love revealed in the scriptures, we confess our shame that once again gay men and lesbian women are under assault by so-called religious people. We appeal to you not to turn from faith in God due to the manifest corruption of some who dishonor that same God by their words and acts.

To Our Opponents

We pledge to you three things:

First, we pledge to you our prayers and supplications to God that your hearts of stone may be changed to hearts of flesh, that you may repent your hatred and turn from your blasphemy of God's name.

Secondly, we pledge to respect your rights to believe, to assemble, to teach and to persuade free from social or legal interference for those are your divinely given human rights.

Lastly, we pledge to you our unmitigated opposition. Within any and all forums of this still free society, we will meet your hatred with our love, your fear with our hope, your ignorance with God's wisdom.

But hear us clearly. We shall not wait passively for others to destroy us. If your hatred and fear bring forth their vile results, if you do attempt to break our community, drive us into hiding, and hunt us down, then with God's help we shall call upon our people to defend themselves.

community clergy denounced the campaign and appealed to San Francisco religious leaders to do the same. A portion of their statement, read by MCC pastor Rev. Jim N. Dykes, was carried on the CBS Evening News. *(The text of the statement follows.)* Joining Dykes were Rev. Jane Spahr of Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, Rabbi Allen Bennett of Congregation Sha'ar Zabav, and Rev. Ken Kammann, co-chair of Dignity Bay Area.

San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein also responded to Zone's plans saying she was sure her "wonderful and tolerant city" would "withstand any onslaught from suburbia." She added, "San Francisco usually welcomes strangers but not bigots or zealots. I suggest they cancel their threatened blitz of hate mail and media, save their money, and contemplate the teaching of the Bible to 'love thy neighbor.' "

WOMEN ORDAINED IN EPISCOPAL PAPER CHASE

CHICAGO--Without a program, you would not have known it–except for the standing-room only crowd and the TV cameras--but it was to be both a historic and a telling moment in the history of the Episcopal Church. Oh so gently, here at St. James' Cathedral, an ordination–of *women*. All without the sanction of the diocese standing committee.

Bishop James Montgomery, who apparently favors strongly the ordination of gays, would sit this chill February evening out elsewhere. He opposes the ordination of women. But recognizing that times change, he had no intention of preventing it. He'd arranged for a "paper chase" whereby Suffragan Bishop Quenton Primo, who is Black, would ordain the four women on behalf of the Dioceses of Newark, Indianapolis, and Central New York--dioceses with whom the candidates had no apparent connection, but which happen to support the ordination of women.

There was circumstance and incense, trumpets and all. There was liturgy-as-usual, with thanksgiving to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost whose grace variously toward "all men" and "mankind" had made all this possible. There were no demonstrators, and when Bishop Primo inquired as to whether anyone present wished to state any reason why the candidates were not fit, no speeches. The sermon, offered by Dr. Christian A. Hovde, made no direct mention of what was occurring, but focussed on the self-giving nature of ministry. But Hovde seemed eager to soothe some controversy: "When you lose a good battle, you ought to lose gracefully and go on." Then, almost specific, he reminded worshippers of "the rejection some of you have felt in the church for many years" and spoke of a less turbulent future: "I charge you all to remember that the pain . . . that has arisen in the church will someday be gone, perhaps after we are all gone."

The elaborate ordination ritual followed as Bishop Prino, enthroned, was presented with each of the candidates. Then a eucharistic celebration that turned out to be more relaxed and featured participation by the four.

Maybe the best clue to the significance of the day appeared during an afternoon rehearsal before there were crowds, cameras, or press to witness it: a tender moment when, for Carol Amadio, Janice Gordon, Chilton Knudsen, and Janice Lee, the run-through was halted for a moment of tears, embraces, and laughter.

PENTECOSTAL RACIAL AND SEXUAL MINORITIES FORM NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

WASHINGTON -- The newest religious task force combatting "racism, sexism, and homophobia" has been formed within Pentecostalism, often considered to be among the most fundamentalist of American faiths.

The new organization, known as the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights (PCHR), originated in response to the "almost total identification of our churches with such extremist groups as the Moral Majority, Christian Voice, and Religious Roundtable, in the public's eye, if not in fact," explained Dr. James S. Tinney, director of the coalition. Tinney, who teaches Journalism at Howard University, has been scheduled to address UFMCC's General Conference in Houston in early August.

"We take as our task the education of Pentecostals and Charismatics regarding the fascist character of such alliances between right-wing politics and conservative religion," Tinney said, "as well as the task of consciousness-raising about the Pentecostal movement's own structural sins against racial and sexual minorities."

The coalition specifically encourages local churches to accept what it calls the "legitimate claims" of feminist, gay rights, and Black and Hispanic liberation movements.

A prepared statement of purpose commits the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights to help members and clergy in the process of reconciling personal religious experience and biblical faith with activistic support for *avant garde* liberation theologies aimed at ending "racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism (or homophobia)."

A first priority of the coalition is "to locate those hundreds of thousands of Pentecostals who are struggling to assert and maintain their special identities within our churches."

Tinney laments the fact that the movement is viewed as a white male religion although "it was founded by a black minister, it has more black adherents than white, and it is predominantly made up of women."

"Since there are nearly 10 million Pentecostals in the U.S. alone, the very lowest estimate suggests that there may be as many as one million lesbian and gay Pentecostas, as well," he added.

The Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights opposes art depicting Christ as white, language using masculine references to God, and restrictions against ordaining women and practicing homosexuals.

For more information write P.C.H.R., Box 386, Howard University, Washington, DC 20059.

Letters

WASHINGTON

Editor, TGC:

As a contributing editor to *The Gay Christian* I wish to respond to the tone and "direction" expressed in the most recent issue. I have been troubled for some time about the fact that TGC does not seem to reflect the theological opinion of the Universal Fellowship, but rather the opinion of one perspective which is both narrow and geographically bound. The broad and diverse experience and expression of the faith which is the UFMCC is not found in your pages.

Let me express as clearly as I can what I find in the writing of the Rev. Karen Ziegler article, "Jesus According to a Lesbian," in the third quarter 1980 issue. While I affirm and rejoice in The Rev. Ziegler's contribution to our knowledge and experience of Jesus in the fullness of his humanity, I continue to be disturbed by the lack of any concept of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. We are left in our incomplete places, abandoned in despair and oppression. How is it that a journal which voices Christian faith omits the unique and essential proclamation of hope and victory over all oppression, despair, evil and death. The glaring lack of this proclamation of the resurrection has the

effect of rendering the rest of Rev. Ziegler's theology as useless as a hammer head without a handle. What good is it if it does not lead to life but wallows in death and despair?

It is my continuing experience that liberation theology is grossly inadequate in its dealing with the "problem of evil" and an understanding of the nature of sin and redemption.

My other great concern with the focus of Rev. Ziegler's article is that she seems to be trapped into making the realing of being a lesbian woman the central focus of her life. This lack of perspective concerns me, for the gay community often chooses to see the world only through the eyes of one's sexuality. Neither Rev. Ziegler's lesbian identity nor my gay male identity must be the focus of life, but rather the wholeness of God's spirit as revealed in Jesus Christ. God offers us great possibilities which are not bound by anyone's sexuality but are offered to our human condition. We must choose to give up our preoccupation with oppression and walk into the "light" of Christ. I sometimes think that we rather enjoy the role of being oppressed and would rather sit in it than receive the wonder of God's gift of greatness.

Now it is time for us to expect great possibilities for our lives. I firmly believe that one's ability to have the promises of God's abundant new life as reality in one's own experience is available to all persons regardless of their social, economic, political, or sexual state. We must begin to affirm that every person is 1) already set free in Jesus Christ, and 2) can choose to embrace and live that freedom. I do not believe that this is naive, but the essential truth of the Christian Church.

Our continued implication that we must struggle to win a battle is further denial of the truth that the battle is over and the victory won. Perhaps the cause of lesbian feminist theology seeks another Messiah; there is no other save Jesus Christ whom history calls Lord and Savior. If we week another savior, one more to our liking, we have long since departed the household of faith.

Lastly, I must say, if we continue to focus upon our own personal pain we will also continue to redirect our energy away from the proclamation of the Good News. The millions of gay men and lesbian women of this country await our telling the Good News: What shall we do?

LARRY J. UHRIG

HOUSTON

Editor, TGC:

In response to the article by Renee McCoy in the Third Quarter issue where she attacks the response of UFMCC to the Cuban Refugees because they are "fairer skinned foreigners": twenty-five percent of the refugees in the Houston MCC Cuban Refugee Relief Program were black.

DEE LAMB

SAN FRANCISCO

Editor, TGC:

We find the tone and content of the third quarter, 1980 issue of *The Gay Christian* disturbing. We are aware of the risk we take in expressing this feeling. It seems that a certain factor of card-stacking in the articles may prejudge any response from white males as sexist and racist, whatever its merits. Since we are no more willing to be discounted for our race and gender than are our sister authors, we plunge ahead more or less fearlessly.

The issues of sexism and racism as they have distorted the Church's witness are undeniable. The fact that they continue to do so is equally undeniable. Nevertheless, it seems possible to express this injustice without claiming that no one has ever suffered in the way the writers' minorities have suffered. It seems more productive to address this injustice with more than a litany of past wrongs and a ventilation of rage and pain. Rage and pain are real and need expression, and gay men know this as part of an oppressed minority, just as do women and third world persons. It is a sad fact that being part of one oppressed minority doesn't seem to keep people from oppressing still other minorities. Some gay men do that, certainly, to women and third world people. But these articles move in the direction of returning that oppression by discounting all of us.

This anger and pain seem to produce a self-righteous tone and a theological expression which stand in opposition to basic statements of our Fellowship, statements which are the heritage of the Christian faith, but which do not seem to bear directly on the question of inclusiveness and Jesus Christ.

The three writers fail to acknowledge sin and oppression as the common possession of humanity. Evil seems to be assigned to "they" and "them." Our faith teaches that there is only "us." Oppression, pain and destruction are real in our lives. It would be a basic and serious omission to allow to stand the assumption that we do not all share in that evil as we share in our humanity. We miss from these articles the acknowledgement that these authors, too, and the minorities for whom they speak, know of what they speak because they share the common sinfulness of humanity in themselves. There is a naivete about evil in the writing which seems almost arrogant. Our foundation lies in the instruction of Jesus Christ first to remove the logs from our own eyes before seeking to remove the splinters from those of our sisters and brothers. To deny the presence of our own disjointed nature, our own incompleteness, our own sin is to risk being irrelevant to the evil of the world and setting it free to wreak even greater havoc.

It is this kind of self-righteousness which marks the history of the Christian Church like cancerous growths from the Medieval Crusades through modern "Christian" terrorism. A righteous "us" against a sinful "them" outlook is neither accurate, Godly nor redemptive. This is true whether the cause is Christian involvement in feminism, racial justice or anything else.

If we learn anything from the mistakes of those who have come before us in the Christian Church, it must be that guilt and condemnation and exclusivism are the very techniques by the use of which we find ourselves in the oppression which now exists. The existence of those forces in these writings can hardly serve to lift us out of that morass.

The most troubling feature of this expression of anger and rejection is the Rev. Ziegler's startling departure from the central teaching of the Christian faith. To assert that we share the divinity of Jesus is either to deny the divinity of Jesus Christ or to elevate ourselves to godhood. Neither of these alternatives is even slghtly compatible with the Christian Cause. Neither is compatible with our belief in Jesus Christ as God, of one substance with God, and God's own Begotten. Without the unique full humanity and full divinity of Jesus Christ, there is no Savior and no salvation. Christianity becomes nothing more than a humanist, pantheist oneness with the cosmos.

At the same time the Rev. Ziegler seriously questions the basis of Christianity, she also provides us with a view of Christology which is essential to our faith. In affirming the humanity of Jesus Christ and not the maleness she begins to return us to the centrality of our faith. But that essential humanness is irrelevant if the divinity is denied.

This issue of TGC reflects a lack of balance which seems to be increasingly characteristic. Our Fellowship hardly needs more polarization in its publications than is already beginning to appear. This is not to say that TGC needs homogenizing. But as the UFMCC journal of theological reflection it needs to reflect a broad cross-section of thought and expression. An issue almost totally the product of one city and one educational background is hardly a cross-section, even of the more liberal side of our denomination.

The issue in question abounds, as does TGC in general recently, in cdondemnation and vitiation. Consciousness-raising is crucial for us. A call to repentance for our sins is basic to equipping us to move forward as Christ's Church. But this is not a case in which some of us are righteous by virtue of our oppression and others are not. We struggle daily to return the expression of our faith to its just and righteous center, to eradicate oppression and evil whereever we find them. We know this is our attainable goal because we approach it only when our own strength is bolstered and enabled by the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. Our faith is to be a source of joy and peace, even if some expressions of the Church have been sad and divisive.

The tone of the writing in this TGC was filled with bitterness and despair, and while those are states which must be accepted and healed, they are not the expression of freedom from oppression or an impetus to free others. Life cannot be built upon pain and evil, bitterness and despair. To be mired in these is to choose death and not life. Roberta Flack, in her song "Go Up,

Moses," exhorts us to let *Pharoah* go. Otherwise, even if we force Pharoah to release us, we shall be no more able to walk out of our oppression than were some of those in Auschwitz who, upon their liberation, walked out into the sun and then fled back into their prisons in fear and confusion.

If we are to reform our Church, it cannot be by destroying the faith on which we are founded. If we are to free ourselves from oppression, it cannot be by the bitter, angry, desperate marks of that same oppression. We must be called to repentance. We must also *call* to repentance. And all of us must share in both.

MICHAEL E. ENGLAND
A. RICHARD WEATHERLY
ROBERT M. FALLS

The writers are ministers on the staff of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco. England is a contributing Editor of this journal.

LOS ANGELES

Editor, TGC:

I am writing to thank you for printing the article by Renee McCoy in the last issue of *The Gay Christian*. As a Black lesbian and a member of this Fellowship, I found the article precise in articulating my own feelings. I,too, am clinging to UFMCC with a belief and a hope for change. The article also helped me toward a better self-understanding.

It is my belief that *The Gay Christian*, and, in fact, any publication that is handled through the Fellowship offices should always represent the fact that our Fellowship is open to all and that as growing Christians our minds should be always open to looking at and reflecting upon varied points of view. *The Gay Christian* is an excellent challenge to both my day to day thinking and my theological views. I am grateful for the challenge. Thank you.

Prayerfully supporting and encouraging you and all who contribute articles to the magazine,

In Jesus, the Liberator,

RUTH GOUGH

CHICAGO

Editor, TGC:

I am not black. I am not lesbian. I need *The Gay Christian*. TGC gives me a chance to hear voices that I need to hear.

This is Jesus According To Me: Someone who learned from a Canaanite woman, somebody who sat with a Samaritan at the well, one who defended and befriended a prostitute. Jesus, who embraced the racial, sexual, and religious "enemies" of his upbringing . . . who listened to their voices and heard truth, was not afraid of hearing truth from those he had been raised to fear or ignore.

In the tradition of Jesus' experience, TGC's 1980 Third Quarter Issue gives me a chance to hear new voices, gain new perspectives, experience new truth . . .truth I need, truth I can embrace.

SHERRIE ZIMBELMAN

ADDRESS WITHHELD

Editors, TGC:

I strongly support the stated purpose of The Gay Christian "to build community . . . . ", however, I deplore the attempts to do so under the "Christian" label by those who reject the unique deity of Jesus Christ -- especially when the rejection of Jesus as Lord and the Bible as authoritative is the only theological viewpoint represented in the "theological journal of the UFMCC."

I would defend the rights of Ms. Hamilton, Ms. Ziegler, and Mr. Deacon, et al., to say most anything, no matter how heretical or angry they might wish to be seen; however, it seems to me a point of integrity that they should refrain from using the identity of Christian and withdraw into a religious community in which their views would be consonant with their co-believers/disbelievers. The extensive sounding board afforded anti-orthodoxy through TGC is not commensurate with the relative handful of MCCers whose views are regularly presented.

I do not believe that TGC should receive one cent of denominational funding; if people really want it, it should pay for itself. In my estimation, this magazine in no way exemplifies the wide theological diversity in UFMCC. As far as I can tell there seems to be little of the reconciling spirit of the one whose name Christians own. There's not been any apparent attempt to hear, understand, and build community with the thousands of Evangelical MCCers by editors of TGC but I have heard a lot of rage, anger, bitterness, frustration, and repudiation toward us. Editors, if you truly want to be inclusive, why not show it? However, if inclusion into your community means that I must repudiate the literal death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior then you can keep your community without me! But please, don't call it a Christian community; it's not!

When I first joined UFMCC in 1971 I understood that I was joining a "Christian Church." Recently some in control of UFMCC media are forcing me to question whether that has changed -- or is it perhaps just that some of those who write don't belong?

NAME WITHHELD

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THE EDITOR REPLIES:

Name withheld has for some time been printing editorials about us in a newsletter he co-edits: to date, six pages of attack on TGC, me, the congregation I serve, and several TGC contributors. Last Summer, after a two-page broadside, he and his co-editor declined to print my 10-point reply to what I consider to be factual distortions and unfair attacks -- because, said they, the matter was now closed. Having declared theirs to be both the first and last word, they went on to print yet another, four-page attack in an issue that seems to have appeared in January. We weren't sent a copy. The central arguments are the same:

a) "TGC is a propaganda sheet for the most radical unchristian elements" in UFMCC, according to the newsletter, and some of us "are not theological Christians . . . . They know they do not fit in UFMCC" because they hold "unchristian doctrines."

b) "The rejection of Jesus as Lord and the Bible as authoritative is the only theological viewpoint presented . . . .," he says, above.

c) TGC "exists on the denominational funding." As he argues above, such funding should cease, every cent, right now.

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The writer seems consistently to disregard the facts, and he's wrong on that last point. TGC more than pays its own way through subscriptions. The same cannot be said for IN UNITY, which is *dependent on denominational money, and copy for which must pass a panel of three pentecostals of fundamentalist or "evangelical" persuasion. It will be recalled that the two magazines were split as a kind of response to the fact of pluralism within UFMCC and the accompanying fact that some theological conservatives objected to being reminded of that fact via a single denominational magazine.*

As for his second point, we say, Phooey. Neither this issue nor five years of my stewardship as editor substantiates his charge, which I take to mean the exclusive presentation of far-left views. Look for yourself.

And his first point: Ya know, we're pretty tired of an increasing flow of propaganda and poison-pen newsletters that fall regularly out of our mailbox announcing that we aren't really Christians. Maybe if there's a Last Judgment, God will empanel some of these newsletter-writers as judges so She can take a break. Many of us just aren't interested in the writer's definition of "Christian," which seems to have to do with a set of dogmatic opinions based on literal *interpretations of the tradition about the life and teachings of Jesus and, presumably, of the whole Bible and the historic creeds' interpretation thereof, too. Only the literalist is actually "Christian." But others of us, too, work with and interpret the same tradition; our lives are pro-*

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